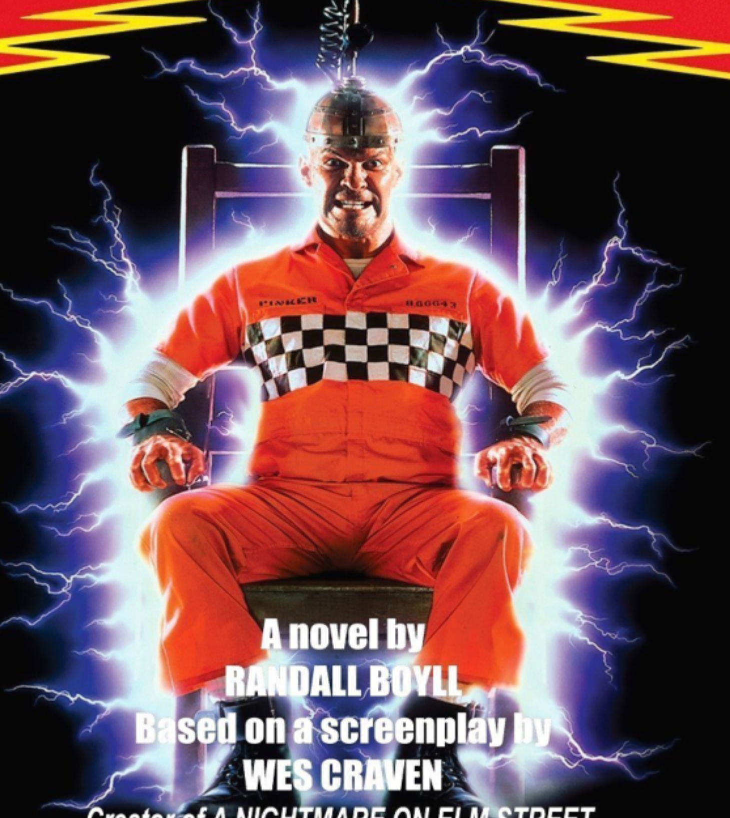
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Based on a screenplay by
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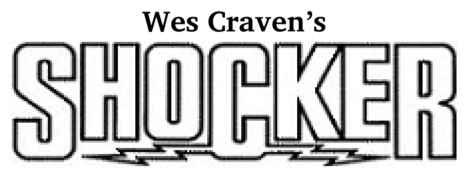
MASS MURDERER HORACE PINKER WAS ON THE LOOSE

… and no one in Maryville, Ohio, slept soundly. They locked their windows. They bolted their doors. They prayed for their lives.

Then on October 2, at 6:45 a.m., Horace Pinker was put to death in the electric chair.

Now, he's really mad.

Wes Craven's



The electrifying motion picture from Wes Craven, creator of A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET—now a terrifying new novel by Randall Boyll.

“WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR …?
DO IT TO ME!”

Sweat was running openly down the warden’s face now. He looked over to the guard who was waiting to pull the plug on Pinker forever. “You heard the man,” he croaked. “Do it.”

Something buzzed loudly. Pinker convulsed in his chair with a disgusting, piglike grunt. Sparks popped and flew. Pinker strained against the straps with his eyes rolling up in his head. A blast of smoke shot out from under the copper cap, yet still Pinker grinned, and grinned, beaming with some wild brand of insane ecstasy.

The doctor gasped. “Oh my God,” she whispered. “Oh my dear God …”

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BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

SHOCKER

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SHOCKER

Prologue •

For the ninth time in his career as a television reporter, Walker Stevens, handsome anchorman and roving reporter for the Channel 8 news, known womanizer and a notorious wearer of ill-fitting wigs, was busy throwing up into somebody's hedges.

The killer had struck again on this damp, windy night in Maryville, Ohio. Struck again, and hard.

It was a snoopy neighbor who had noticed that her somewhat grumpy neighbor Todd Jenkins had left his porch light on. That was at midnight, she would tell Walker Stevens when he got done barfing and got around to interviewing people, and she just knew something was out of whack. She would admit that she *might* have heard screams coming from Mr. Jenkins's house, but then, it was late and windy and the noise might have been the wind hooting around the eaves and whooping across the gutters of her house. Besides, she would tell the daring reporter with the weak stomach, what happened over there was certainly none of *her* business.

Nevertheless, she had tromped over to the Jenkinses' house with her nightgown flapping and her hair tattering in the breeze, wondering if perhaps the family had dozed off without realizing their teenage daughter hadn't come home at eleven. Though she wasn't one to talk, the Jenkinses' daughter was pretty commonly known as a slut, and you can bet everybody knew it.

As it turned out, it would have been better for the daughter if she had come home just a wee bit later.

Walker Stevens straightened with curds of vomit dribbling down the corners of his lips, his bowels still churning and his mouth pasty with the taste of fresh puke. His cameraman had mercifully not taped this ninth episode of *Stevens vs. Stomach;* he was busy filming the chaos that had descended upon the Jenkinses' property since the nosy neighbor called the police, hysterical to report that everyone in the house had been butchered.

Butchered? Walker Stevens wondered as he reassembled himself for the camera and the *Eyewitness News* report that would be aired in the morning. His wig was hanging askew and he hurriedly shoved it back into place on the shiny dome of his head. Yes, he thought, *butchered* is a good word to describe what's in that house. Or *slaughtered. Sacrificed?* What kind of man could do those—things—to women and children in the dark of the night? And for God's sake, why was he

doing it? Nine times in nine months. Corpse-of-the-Month Club, just send a penny and you get twelve albums for free, each etched with the dying screams of the slaughtered …

Walker nearly slapped himself to make the thoughts go away. He looked around, feeling vaguely guilty, as he always did after losing his lunch in the bushes while about a dozen cops and various medical people strolled around looking grim. They didn't throw up. Why should he?

He wiped a hand over his chin, blinking against the red and blue strobing of the police cars' lights, almost dizzy from all the commotion. The Channel 8 van had been the second vehicle on the scene, faster even than most of the cops, thanks to Channel 8's recent purchase of a police-channel radio because of the killings. Walker had been ready to call it quits for the night when the news director charged into his office, nearly hysterical himself, and shouted the phrase that was becoming much too familiar in Maryville: He Did It Again.

Kind of corny, kind of cliché, but oh so very true.

"Let's shoot," Walker said now to his cameraman, who was panning the house as the last body, wrapped in bloody sheets, was wheeled out on a steel gurney to join its family of corpses. "I want to get the hell away from here. Gotta get away from here. Look, Dave, are you even listening?"

"Last shot," Dave mumbled.

"Christ, it's stock footage by now. How many times can you film a dead body?"

"I'd say about thirty times, if you count these four. What kind of background do you want?"

"Just the house. No bodies, please. In the name of Christ, no more bodies."

"No problem. Ready?"

"Think so." Walker looked up at the sky while he adjusted the knot of his tie. Familiar stars, so far away and safe, far away and safe from these atrocities and this horror. Walker had been the third person to enter the house. The lights were on, the remains of the smashed front door flapping back and forth on its hinges. Some woman wearing a nightgown was standing by the porch, looking fairly green beneath a layer of face cream. Ignoring her, Walker had hopped up the steps while Dave got his camera ready. He had been crazily hoping for some strange and new kind of murder, perhaps a simple gunshot victim or simple stabbing. Anything to break the monotony of the hack and slash that had been going on for so long. Crazily hoping, but not ready to believe it himself.

It was the teenage girl on the couch that had bothered him most. She was sitting in a fairly natural pose, young girl posing for her high school picture, head tipped slightly backward and resting lightly on the top rim of the sofa. Several flaws, though: her mouth hung open; she looked as if a camera had caught her in the middle of a word, or perhaps a yawn. Her eyes were also open. No harm in that. Another flaw, though, a very disturbing one. She was topless. Her nipples had been sliced off. Her stomach seemed strangely flat, almost deflated. There was a vertical cut from her navel to her chest.

Her guts had been shoveled out of her and deposited on the far edge of the sofa. Some gray thing dangled to the floor from the pile of muck, a thick and nauseating rope of intestine.

Walker heard the two cops puttering about in the kitchen, no doubt finding other grisly trophies the unknown slasher had left behind. He turned to leave, already feeling too sick to take any more, hating the stench of fresh blood that filled the house like some putrid swamp gas, when something fell out of the girl's mouth and slithered down her chest on a wide trickle of remarkably crimson blood.

It was one of her nipples.

Walker stared at it as it performed a flip-flop between the girl's breasts, youthful pink and no larger than a quarter, and fell into her lap with a slight *plip!* The horror was so huge that Walker was unable to pull himself away.

The other nipple slipped out of her mouth on a drool of blood. For a moment it dangled there, a hideous pendulum on a string of bloody mucus.

That just about did it for Walker. He charged down the steps and crashed into the hedges, remembering with terrible clarity what he had had for supper: pork chops, mashed potatoes, peas, a piece of cheesecake. They all reappeared without so much as a hello, drenching the bushes, turned now to sour mush.

"Got you focused," Dave said.

Walker jerked. He had been horsing with his tie for a full minute, reliving the sight of the girl, the warm smell of blood, the way the whole house seemed to shriek death and mayhem. What had it been like in there? How long had the slasher taken to finish his ghastly work?

Dave handed him a microphone. Walker swallowed, trying to clear his throat. The glare from Dave's light was too bright; he hated to squint at the camera, but he had spent too much time staring into dark bushes and needed time to let his eyes adjust.

"Taping," Dave said, and the camera came alive with a slight buzz. "They can edit it later. Got anything in mind to say?"

Walker shrugged. Sure he had something to say. He wanted to say that what he had seen had made him toss his cookies into somebody's hedges. He wanted to say he had seen something no one should ever have to see, smelled things no one should ever have to smell. But he was a professional newsman, had been for the last fourteen years, and would not blow it now by going berserk while taping the morning's hottest news.

"Let's go," he said. "I'll fake it somehow."

Dave pulled away from the eyepiece of his shoulder camera. "Hey, Walker?"

"Yeah? What now?"

"You've got puke on your tie."

He made a face at the camera and took his tie off. So what if he was going informal tonight? By morning he might be insane as well.

"Still rolling," Dave said. "Take one."

Walker nodded, and gave it a shot. He forced his face to look cool and unhurried. He promised himself that as soon as this was over, he would go home and get screaming drunk.

"All of Maryville is awakening to a new horror on this, what should be a fine Saturday morning in our peaceful city, and Channel 8 Eyewitness News *is here to report a new chapter in the savage wave of murders. Ladies and gentlemen, it has happened again …*

Chapter • One

… in the early hours of this morning the killer struck once more, again killing an entire family, again escaping without being seen. And this city's descent into frustration and terror deepens …"

"Jesus, can that shit, would you? I hate bad news. And I don't exactly love that guy in the wig. What's his name, anyway?"

The boy behind the counter shrugged. "Elmer Fudd with hair, I guess. What's your pleasure?"

"Coke and lots of ice. I'm sweating like a hog."

"Coke it is." The counter boy ducked out of sight to fetch a cup.

Jonathan Parker leaned hard on the wobbly plywood countertop of the open-air lunch stand, reaching to change the channel on the mini TV that was parked in the corner and blaring such bad tidings. He studied the television for a second, momentarily noticing that the reporter looked as if he'd been a little too close to an artillery blast. His hair was a wild tangle. He was squinting into the camera. He'd even lost his tie. Jonathan shrugged to himself. Must be bad business, reporting atrocities. Perhaps the chap should find a new line of work.

He ratcheted the channel changer while the boy filled the cup, finally finding a football game on 11. Seahawks against the Browns. Not bad.

The counter boy shoved the familiar red and white Coke cup across the counter. Jonathan snagged it easily, then drained half of it in three huge swallows. Behind him a glorious sun shown down on the practice field, where three dozen players were ambling around, half of them in red jerseys, the other half in blue. There were even a few ass-lickers doing jumping jacks to impress the coach. Jonathan snorted, chewing on ice. Nice guys, but strictly bench material. Bouncing around during a break doth not a football player make.

He, on the other hand, had never been bench material, and didn't intend to be. Twenty years old, junior at State University maintaining respectable grades, best flanker the university had seen in six years, admired by some as the college cocksman, envied by others for his natural good looks—if pressed to admit it, he might well say he had the world at his feet.

That would change soon enough.

He finished his Coke and snatched his helmet off the ground,

surveying the clutch of fans and gawkers who had come to sit on the bleachers and get a tan and some free entertainment. Some of them were familiar faces, some not. Jonathan knew well enough that they knew who *he* was, a fact he accepted with an uneasy mixture of pride and curiosity. Why did they like him so well? What was the deal with all this admiration coming his way? He was just doing the best he could.

"Another drink before you go get yourself killed?" the counter boy asked, grinning.

"Tell you what," Jonathan replied, grinning back at him. "You get your jollies by watching television murders, I'll get mine by being mauled by eleven guys."

The boy stepped away and changed the channel. "The body count's up to thirty now," he said, losing his grin. "They've been running the same report every ten minutes, it seems. I haven't had a good night's sleep in a month, thanks to that creep."

Jonathan wormed his head into his helmet. From the bleachers came a few half-hearted claps. He gave them a Japanese-style bow. Somebody whistled. The coach began to bellow orders.

"Better go," Jonathan said. "Here's a tip for your good service: if you don't like the news, don't watch it. Simple, huh?"

"Oh, sure. I just hope you don't play football like you live your life."

Jonathan gave him a wink, not quite sure just what the kid had meant by that, and not really caring. The teams were assembling at the line of scrimmage. He found himself grinning again. Some people in the tiny audience were greeting his return to the field with hoots and screams. One clown began to boo, but was quickly attacked by a group of girls. As Jonathan drew closer to the noise and the forty-yard line, where the players were assembling, he noticed one girl who was especially pretty, sitting quietly by herself in the fourth row. She looked somewhat familiar; he made a mental note to talk to her after practice. But until five o'clock it was strictly catch pigskin and assault friends.

He chuckled to himself as he walked. It was a beautiful day, the air clear and bright, the sky an unending blue, and he was having fun. Nobody could ruin a day like this; such days were too rare in Ohio, where the humidity usually hung at the 80 percent mark and you could work up a sweat without moving a muscle. He flung his arms wide as if to embrace the world, spun around once, found himself feeling stupid, and decided to settle down to the business at hand. The gymnastics could come later, if he was still in one piece and in the same frame of mind.

Coach Cooper seemed to have similar ideas. He blew a harsh blast

on his whistle, pointing at Jonathan and making hurry-up motions. Jonathan broke into an easy trot to join his team, mentally preparing himself for the upcoming tosses and tumbles, trying to remember the plays the coach had spent all day drilling into the team's heads. He joined them just as they went into a huddle.

"No change since break, as far as I can tell," the quarterback said. "Set? Let's kill 'em."

They shouted agreement. Jonathan stayed quiet. What the hell had been the play just before break? Blue 21? Or was it Green 9? Well, whatever. He had faked it before and he could fake it again.

He got into position and went down into his stance. The quarterback did his usual hups and hoops, the ball was snapped, and Jonathan sidestepped the defensive linebacker before he had a chance to get off his knuckles. He heard a satisfying *oof* as the linebacker slapped facedown in the grass, and then he was running, running, cutting through the secondary like a deer, dodging in the graceful steamroller fashion that had made him a star. At the twenty-yard mark he glanced back and saw the football rocketing toward him, as well as Bruno Parmridge, who was about to nail him at the knees. Jonathan flitted sideways to lose this annoying coverage, and then the ball smacked into his hands and he was headed for the end zone, grinning, ready to let out a victory whoop. He glanced sideways to the bleachers and saw the pretty girl again. He tossed her a toothful smile, slowing a little to make sure she could see it, secure in the knowledge that she was undoubtedly a fan of the Boy Wonder and would demand his autograph after this touchdown.

At which point a bulldozer plowed into him from behind, kicking his feet out from under him and making him perform one of the world's greatest double somersaults. He landed hard on his back and the ball squelched out of his hands like something greased. He was aware of people piling all over each other in an attempt to capture the lost ball, grunting and snarling. The ball popped into the air and someone caught it. It was difficult for Jonathan to tell which team while lying on his back wondering if his spine was shattered or merely broken in several places.

A face loomed across Jonathan's vision, casting a shadow over him and blotting the sun from his eyes. He blinked up at Sam "Rhino" Wyndham, wondering where all the sparkling dots were coming from. A hand reached down and hauled him upright.

"Just keep looking at the girls, Romeo," Rhino said, and laughed. "Shit, you even make *me* look good."

Jonathan jerked away and adjusted his shoulder pads. "Lucky shot, that's all." The dots were fading and the world looked fairly normal

again. The world also contained Coach Cooper, who was approaching at a fast trot with his whistle bouncing on his chest and murder in his eyes, his mouth working open and shut as he said every curse and epithet known to man. Jonathan shrank backward involuntarily, not liking what was about to come.

"What the hell's happened to your concentration, Parker?"

The coach charged forward, a man big enough to make even Rhino look small. An ex-linebacker, he had not let his age overcome his physique; if anything, age had only made him meaner. "Are you staying in training, or are you sneaking out at night?" he bellowed.

Jonathan flashed his best phony smile. "Staying in training, Coach. Swear to God."

Coach Cooper eyed him for several long seconds. Rhino used the opportunity to blend in with the crowd. Jonathan held on to his smile as long as he could, showing mostly teeth. The coach reached for him and Jonathan flinched instinctively; but instead of some assault on his person he felt the coach's huge arm drape itself around his shoulders.

"You know what?" the coach asked sweetly.

Jonathan shrugged. "Depends on what is what, I guess."

"You could be one for the record books, Jonathan. You could be one of the big boys, be a star. You came up the hard way, and you've got great potential, and the guts to go for it. But you know what else?"

Jonathan cocked his head to indicate he was listening. The weight of the coach's arm was becoming heavier by the second. "What?"

"I don't know if you've got greatness in your blood. I understand that you don't know who your mother and father were, and that you were adopted."

"Put in foster care," Jonathan said, uneasy with this.

"Foster care, adopted, put on a doorstep in a wicker basket. The point is, we don't have the advanced technology to analyze blood to see if there's something floating around inside called greatness. You have to show the world you've got what it takes. You have to concentrate your will on greatness." His arm fell away, and he stepped back. "See, if you don't concentrate, if you don't keep your mind inside your helmet instead of using it to throw kisses to the crowd, you'll never be great. You look away, and somebody creams your ass for you."

Jonathan nodded, still disturbed by the coach's knowledge of his background. It was true that he had been found wandering and lost thirteen years ago. It was true that the courts had put him in a foster home. But it was also true that it was his business and nobody else's.

Coach Cooper's face softened. "Look, Jonathan, I'm just saying you

need to concentrate a little harder, stand above the crowd." He pointed at the flock of students in the bleachers. "Like that girl over there with no shirt on, poor thing."

Jonathan's head jerked to follow his finger. A moment later a tremendous slap on the helmet sent it thumping to the ground.

The coach smiled his evil sweet smile. "That's what I'm talking about. And use your chin strap, for God's sake."

He stalked away. "Won't happen again, Coach," Jonathan called after him, knowing it was futile. The coach merely jerked a thumb up, telling Jonathan to get back in the game. Resigned, a bit chagrined, Jonathan picked up his helmet and trotted back to the line of scrimmage. He knew he wouldn't be embracing the world tonight; all the good and happy feelings were deserting him fast.

"Same play," the quarterback shouted. "Parker, cut right like you did last time, only don't screw it up like you did. Pay attention."

Swell, Jonathan thought bitterly as he put his helmet on and snapped it tight. *Tell the whole frigging world.* He dropped down into stance and found himself eyeing Rhino. "Don't say anything," Jonathan muttered. "Just don't say a word."

Rhino responded quickly: "A word."

"Told you not to say it."

Rhino looked up to the fourth-row bleachers, then back down to Jonathan. "You look like you've been up all night screwing."

Jonathan snorted. "Just can't sleep lately."

"Maybe if you tried sleeping alone?"

"Ah, eat shit."

"You get more ass than a toilet seat, Jon. Don't lie to your good buddy Rhino."

Jonathan cocked his head to look at Rhino's feet. "Shut up and tie your laces before you get killed."

"Huh?" Rhino looked between his legs; at the same instant the quarterback took the snap from the center and jogged backward, waiting for an opening. The linemen slammed into each other, pedaling furiously, uprooting grass. Jonathan jumped over Rhino and sprinted to the twenty-yard line, already looking for the pass. It sailed in a beautiful rainbow arc and plopped into his hands. He charged toward the goal line, his blood pumping loud in his ears and an involuntary smile spreading across his face. At the ten-yard line he turned and shouted to Rhino.

"Where there's a will there's a way, big boy!"

He turned again and poured on the steam, laughing, once again in command of his world.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the girl. She had stood up. She was wearing tight Levi's and a gray sweatshirt with the sleeves pulled up to her elbows. The sun seemed to sparkle in her auburn hair. Her face was radiant as she smiled at him.

He turned his head and smiled back. God, but was she *pretty*.

He turned back to the business at hand in time to see the bright galvanized steel of the goalpost an inch from his face. He collided with it going perhaps twenty-five miles an hour. In the short contest between man and post, post won. Jonathan careened backward seeing stars, comets, the Crab nebula. He dropped in the grass like a sack of wet cement.

Rhino ran to the rescue while Jonathan pondered the nature of the universe. Rhino got two hands under his shoulders and lifted him upright. "Hey, man, are you okay?"

"Never felt better," Jonathan mumbled, not sure if what he was seeing was Halley's comet or Han Solo's *Millenium Falcon.* Everything was black and white and—red. All of it tinged with red.

"Great," Rhino said, and pulled his hands away. Jonathan stood there swaying, a young man of twenty who had perhaps indulged in too much beer; that, or been run over by a bus.

"Sure you're okay?"

"Yowza." The red was deepening, growing thicker. It seemed to run down the field of his vision in scarlet lines, like paint down a television screen. He could almost smell it, and it was not a good smell.

"Up to you." Rhino walked off just as Coach Cooper raced over. He seemed ecstatic.

"Wow! Wow! That's more like it, Parker! That's concentration! That's using your will to greatness! And using your head, too! Wow!" He stared at him for a while. Jonathan was trying to decide which way was up and which way was down.

"Parker? Jon?"

Jonathan gurgled something in reply.

"Off the field with you, Jon. Take the rest of the day off. Okay?"

Sure, it was okay. An order to run sixty laps would have been just as okay. An order to stand before a firing squad would have been okay. Everything was red and okay.

He stumbled off the field as a student-trainer ran up with a warm-up jacket. He tried to drape it over Jonathan's shoulders, but Jonathan shrugged it away. The trainer was a small man, but tough. His real name was Roy Stuart, but everybody called him Pac-Man for reasons known only to the inventor of nicknames. He was rapidly becoming

pesky.

"You might have a concussion, man," Pac-Man shrieked. "Brain damage! Occipital lobe damage! I'm taking anatomy this semester. Blood clot on the medulla oblongata! Cerebral cortex inflammation! Getting a B, too. At least so far. Frontal lobe trauma! Hypertension! Polemic—"

"Shut up," Jonathan grunted.

"S'pose I could."

He wandered off. Jonathan reached the sideline as his bench-sitting replacement hustled onto the field, leaving an open spot on the end of the bench beside a card table loaded with Gatorade and paper cups. Jonathan raised his head woozily and saw the pretty girl stepping down from the bleachers, coming toward him, smiling. He gave her back a crazy grin while the world rocked and rolled under his feet.

She came to the bottom row and said something. Jonathan leaned forward to catch it. The world tilted upward and the card table hit him on the face guard. Suddenly he was wet and smelling like oranges, and the card table was broken in half. Things sloshed and splattered. Jonathan was just along for the ride.

Hands were all over him. He slapped them away. Somebody turned him over to face the brilliant late-afternoon sky. Jonathan used some inventive language to make them back off. Then someone else loomed over him, a face framed in auburn hair.

"Are you going to live?" she asked, frowning at him.

Jonathan tried to raise his head. It wasn't worth the effort. "Do I know you?"

"Name's Alison." She stared at him. "Alison Clement. Coming back yet?"

He let his eyes fall shut. She reached over his face guard and slid his eyes open with two very soft and fragrant fingers. "I sit next to you in chemistry, Jon. Okay?"

"Whuzza?"

"We've been dating on and off for a year. Didn't you recognize me when you smiled?"

Jonathan sighed, still puzzling the mysteries of heaven and earth. "Say who?"

"Alison. You told me once you wanted me to bear your children. Remember?"

Jonathan started up on his elbows. "Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Bear my children. Maybe you should call them. I want to see our

family before I go …”

She giggled. “We haven’t had any children yet.” Leaning closer, she whispered, “We haven’t even slept together.”

This was puzzling. “Why not?”

“Because I won’t let you.”

“Goody. I want to be respected as a person first.”

She smiled at him, looking very motherly. “I’ll help you home.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

“Take my hands.”

She extended them. Jonathan didn’t need much convincing. They were warm and soft as she helped him up. Much softer than the goalpost, and easier to look at.

He decided he liked this Alison chick a lot. Perhaps someday they would really get married and she could bear those children. Perhaps he and Alison would tie the knot and stay together forever. Thinking these thoughts was better than kissing the goalpost, anyway.

But that, too, would change.

Chapter • Two

It was nearing sunset by the time Alison and Jonathan found their way to Grant Street, where Jonathan's tiny studio apartment was located. The sky was a deep and lovely red above the rows of houses, deepening to purple at the horizon; rooftop antennas seemed to reach for this colorwork like black skeletal fingers. Other pedestrians of little Maryville were scuttering about their business as if afraid of ghosts, wanting to be in the safety of their homes before night came and another family met its savage end. The fact that the killer, up to now, had performed his butchery only once every month didn't carry much weight for those most prone to terror: the elderly, the single mother with a houseful of children, the young father who would not submit to the humiliation of needing a gun in the house. But for the tapping of shoes against sidewalk cement, stillness hung over Maryville like a black shroud.

They had stopped for pizza, Jonathan with stars in his eyes that had nothing to do with smashing into a metal goalpost, Alison demure and kind, and a fan of anchovies. Ooky-ooky, Jonathan had thought, but gamely ate the salt-laden delicacy without so much as a hint that he hated anchovies the way most people hate snakes. The hours drifted by, the remaining pizza slices turned cold and dead-mozzarella ugly, the ice in their Coke glasses turned to warm water, and at the crucial moment Jonathan realized he hadn't brought any money. His wallet was in the locker room at school.

Alison paid the tab with more good grace than Jonathan would have believed, scraping down to the last bit of change in her coin purse. Standing guiltily behind her at the cash register, Jonathan noticed once again the luster of her hair, and the sweet smell of something—perfume? shampoo?—that she carried with her, and the way her Levi's curved in all the right directions. Slim hips, fabulous legs, at least a C-cup's worth of goodies under her sweatshirt, a face that could kill the staunchest sailor. Amazing.

Now on Grant Street, walking arm in arm, Jonathan dangled his helmet from his fist while Alison wrapped her warm fingers securely around his arm. Jonathan found himself wondering how he possibly could have dated this Alison girl before without falling instantly in love. Had the collision with the goalpost scrambled his brain, or had it straightened it out? Was he really here, calmly walking toward his

apartment with this gorgeous babe, or was he dead on the football field, transported to heaven with his skull wrapped around a piece of galvanized pipe?

Don't be stupid, his inner voice told him. You are where you are and she is what she is. You are perfectly fine.

At which point he stumbled over an invisible crack in the sidewalk and nearly went sprawling. His helmet thunked to the cement, and then Alison was pulling him upright.

She touched his head. "Straight to bed with you. Either that, or you wear that helmet while we walk."

He put on a smile. "Straight to bed? Now we're talking."

She smiled back. "You know what, Mr. Jonathan Parker? You are quite possibly certifiably nuts."

He ran a hand through her hair. "That's why you like me. You do, don't you? I know we've been out on …"

He stopped suddenly, puzzled. It was as if his inner voice had told him something barely audible, yet extremely important. Concussion? Brain damage, as Pac-Man had said? Or just a screwball side effect from too many anchovies?

Alison looked at him curiously. "Something on your mind?"

"Yeah," he said, his voice low. "Something."

He made a move to cross the street, with Alison still clutching his arm. It seemed darker now. The red and purple sundown was gone, replaced by a turbulent and angry sky. The wind kicked up, blowing cast-off rubbish along the gutters, making the trees above scrape each other and whisper secrets in the dark.

He looked up. All the streetlights were dead. The air seemed colder and somehow heavy, thick with the smell of salt.

Salt?

He took a step, feeling Alison's hands fall away from his arm. In the new darkness he was able to see faint blue light through the windows of the houses that lined the street, and above the hiss of the wind the familiar strains of the national anthem wafting out of the houses.

Midnight, then. Or … later. How the hell?

He heard Alison whisper. "Jonathan? Where are we?"

He rubbed a hand over his head, frowning. "I was raised on this street. My foster parents still live here with that Bobby kid, and that new girl they adopted after I left. And there's …"

The blue glow of lights flicked off in unison, leaving ghost houses with blank eyes for windows. Jonathan's frown deepened. He heard distant thunder, deep and strangely echoing. In the dark he could

make out the angles of a familiar house.

"That's where I used to live," he said, pointing. The wind gusted and he blinked his eyes against the dust. When he opened them again he saw the dim outline of a white van parked in the driveway.

He stepped closer, squinting. The van had a crudely hand-painted sign on its side. *Pinker's TV Repair—Service in Your Home.*

He walked around the van to the front door, hearing Alison's unsteady footsteps behind. Inside a short front porch carpeted in screaming green Astroturf was the main door to the house, the door Jonathan himself had opened and shut a billion times in his thirteen years there as a foster child of the Parkers, Don and Diane, two of the finest people ever to raise a child they couldn't call their own. Jonathan peered into the dark, trying to make sense of the dim and jumbled images. Yes, there was the door, but it was open and swinging on its hinges in the wind, the hinges giving out a faint but familiar squawk. Behind the door was nothing but darkness.

"Alison," he whispered over his shoulder, "I don't think you ought to be here. There's something, something …"

He turned his head.

Alison was gone. A dwarf tornado of leaves swirled past, skittering along the pavement. The dead houses across the street seemed to stare at him with their black window eyes.

He turned back, still thinking of Pac-Man and his woeful predictions. Concussion. Blood clot on the brain. Dislocation of the think-bone. Hallucinations of the weirdest sort.

He started up the three stairs that led to the front door. The hinges creaked and creaked as the door performed its slow back-and-forth progress, perhaps a warning, perhaps an illusion, perhaps too real to be believed.

He came to the door and put an end to its noises. He stepped inside the house he had called home for thirteen years.

Someone had laid a flashlight on the floor. Its pale white beam showed nubbles of carpet that flowed to dimness and a wall.

Someone was holding it. Better said, someone *had* been holding it.

Bobby, recent foster addition to the home, was dead on the floor, still wearing his pajamas. Blood was spreading in a slow pool beneath him. The fallen flashlight showed that three of his fingers had been broken, ruined, mercilessly twisted to new and impossible angles.

Jesus, Jonathan thought as a disgusted and somehow lurid horror piped through his veins like ice. *The kid's only fourteen!*

He knelt beside the boy, stunned and barely able to think. "Oh, Bobby," he whispered miserably. "How could anyone, how could

anyone have done …”

But Bobby was gone.

Jonathan got to his feet, realizing that yes it was a dream, oh yes it was, because only in dreams and nightmares do the living and the dead vanish before your eyes, only in dreams can the impossible seem plausible. Bobby was gone and soon Jonathan would awaken to a new day and a new sun and a thousand years of girls and football and fun.

He saw bloody footprints leading to the stairway and the upper bedrooms, as if some fool had danced in this blood of dreams and shambled away to finish his dream-business upstairs. The tracks of the left foot were long and smeared on the rug, as if this particular dream-devil had gotten himself a bum leg in some previous nightmare and come back to inquire about a prosthetic device or a possible murder or two. Oh boy, Jonathan thought, oh boy. When we wake up this will be one to tell friends over a cold beer. Whatta rad dream.

He heard the sudden hollow thunder of someone battering fists or feet against a door upstairs. A woman began to scream. Wood crunched. The screams got louder.

Jonathan frowned a dream frown. The lady currently exercising her voice sounded oddly familiar. He decided to go for the bait. “Mom?” he shouted. “Is that you, Mom?”

She replied in a hurry. *“Jonathan! Help us!”*

More wood crunched and snapped. The dream screaming rose to a ferociously unbearable pitch, the screaming, one might say, of someone being murdered.

Dream, Jonathan. Just a dream.

No, wait, wait. That screaming is just too real.

Kick back and relax. Enjoy the show.

But that’s my MOM up there screaming.

Up to you, then. Let your own brain fake you out.

Faked out or not, Jonathan sprinted across the room and onto the stairway. The smashing noises had stopped, but the screams just went on and on. He made it to the landing and hustled down the hallway, interested most of all to see how this particular dream would come out. Predictably, his foster mother Diane’s bedroom door had been smashed through in a shape roughly resembling a large man, and the screaming was entering a range that only dogs might hear. Jonathan stuck his head through the door and got an eyeful of what was happening inside.

Diane was performing a hideous waltz in the bedroom with a huge man, a dance of death, keeping the overlarge butcher knife he had in his right fist away from her throat with the sheer strength of

desperation. The room itself seemed hot and unbearable. The man's exposed arms were a welterwork of tattoos, snakes, goblins, devil faces, obscenities scrawled in Gothic script. Behind these two macabre dancers, drawn into a fetal position on the floor at the head of the bed, was Sally, the newest addition to the family, eight years old and weeping the tears of a child terrified nearly to death.

Diane's wild eyes found Jonathan. Her face was a mask of insane terror. "Help us!" she shrieked. "Jonathan, for God's sake, help us!"

The killer twisted around to look at Jonathan. His face was the face of a maniac, a leering white monster shiny with the sweat of his murders and his insanity. His eyes drew down to black slots while his mouth curved up in a ghastly Cupid's bow. Blood had splashed his face in vertical spurts.

"What are *you* doing here, dipshit?" he demanded with a voice that seemed full of dirt and stone, a voice as old as time and as new as hot steel. "Well?"

Jonathan swallowed. His throat was dry as sawdust. "Let her go," he said, no longer knowing where dream ended and reality began. Maybe he had wandered onto this street, his head full of clots and a severed medulla oblongata, and maybe, just maybe, this all might be real. It seemed as solid as a fistful of rock. "Let her go *now.*"

He was obliged in an instant. Diane was thrown to the floor with a squeal and a thump, and the dream killer

dream killer? dream killer?

advanced on Jonathan. For a moment a ghost of familiarity flitted through Jonathan's mind, the sensation that he had met this man—animal—thing—once before.

"You want to watch?" the big man said, breathing hard in Jonathan's face. The smell of forgotten tombs and coffins slick with rot was carried on the cold outrush of his breath. He grinned.

"Wanna watch? Be my *guest!"*

He turned and lumbered back to Diane, Jonathan's foster mother, Diane, who had by now thrown herself in front of Sally. He raised the knife to stab her in the face. She squealed and shrank back, one arm raised against the knife, her long hair pasted to the back of her neck with sweat, the trembling child behind her clutching her nightgown with both fists. They screamed in unison.

Jonathan stepped through the crude hole in the door. Very realistic wood splinters crunched under his feet. He realized he still had his helmet in his hand, and just about now it seemed like the best weapon available.

He launched himself at the man who had killed Bobby and broken

his fingers, dream or no dream, hauling back with the helmet, ready to sacrifice it but not the woman who had raised him since age seven. The big man had raised the knife, his face distorted into creases of light and shadow and mindless hate, and then Jonathan was upon him, ready to batter him with his helmet or his life.

Instead everything evaporated and Jonathan was falling into a cold and lightless hole.

He shot upright in bed, gasping, pasted with sweat, his eyes bulging in fright. The echoes of Diane's and Sally's screams trickled away to nothing in his ears. There was a television at the foot of his bed, on the dresser in front of the corkboard, and his football trophies and ribbons were neatly arranged around the TV. His Barcalounger, a high school graduation gift from his foster father, Don, and his wife, Diane, was resting easily in its normal place, ready to relax him to sleep, if he needed it, with its back full of rollers and vibration. On the TV some sort of airplane was spinning out of control, howling that peculiar howl that airplanes make whenever they are about to crash and burn.

He looked to the right and saw hard rain coursing down the windowpanes, saw a brief flash of lightning that carried no thunder. The TV airplane howled itself into a tidy belch of flame as it collided with earth. Jonathan looked left.

Alison was in the high-back wicker chair beside him. She looked up, focused on him, then let her eyes fall shut. Then they burst open again. She leaned out of the chair and went to the television.

"Sorry if the noise bothered you, Jon." She looked him over, obviously anxious. "You're sweating like a hog. Bad dream, or does your head hurt?"

Jonathan fell back onto the pillow, weak with relief. No blood, no murder, no house full of the swampy smell of spilled blood. That was alright, but he felt disoriented and lost. He turned his eyes to Alison, putting his memory back together chunk by chunk. Football. Coach. Rhino. Goalpost. Stars. Pizza.

He let out a long, whistling sigh, then said, "Thank God."

Alison smiled uncertainly. "For what?"

"My family. Foster family. I dreamed that—"

She looked at him hopefully. In her eyes he could see doubts of sanity and worry about further complications. He tried his best to put on a smile, but it was a grimace and nothing more. "Why'd you stay?" he asked.

She sat on the side of the bed, clearly embarrassed, her reddening face scarcely visible in the dimness of the bedroom. "I, uh, I thought

maybe I'd stay until you, uh, well, until you—"

"Lived or died?"

Now she sighed. "I guess that's it, yeah."

He took her hand (soft, fragrant—Jesus Christ, why did she go to so much trouble for one lousy football hero?) and squeezed it gently. "I do appreciate it, you know." He tugged her downward and clutched her tight, the noises and mayhem of the dream nothing more now than a quick peek into hell, a little glimpse of the awful and the insane.

Her hair was all over his face, fragrant, tickling his nose. He loved it. Beneath his enfolding hands on her back he could feel the outline of her bra straps beneath her sweatshirt, the fabled C-cups waiting to open up and spill their load of …

. . . *no no no, she's a nice girl …*

fun and frolic. But … not now.

"Tell you what," he said, shoving aside thoughts of death and sex and the screwy life only star-crossed twenty-year-olds could experience. "When we graduate, we get married. I'll teach at Harvard and you teach at Yale. We'll write esoteric novels about people who have nothing better to do than contemplate their navels, and get rich. Never get old, never die young. What say?"

She pulled away to stare at him. He noticed for the first time that her eyes were blue and bright. Too bad she had pizza breath.

"With me all the way?"

She smiled. "You certainly have changed in the last few hours."

He tried to return her smile, but traces of the dream dragged at the edges of his mind and he could almost hear the echoes of a scream. Bad shit, all of that. Mucho bad shit. But thankfully only in the imagination, only in the mind.

He strained upward to plant a well-deserved kiss on her lips. She bent down to receive it. And, of course, the phone rang, a habit all phones seemed to have picked up since the sexual revolution. Alison reached over and picked up the receiver. She said the mandatory hello.

"Whoever it is, hang up," Jonathan whispered. "Don't spoil the moment."

She frowned suddenly. "Yes, he's here, Lieutenant Parker. Just a moment."

She handed the phone over. "Your foster dad. He sounds funny."

"Don?"

"Don't you call him Dad?"

He gave her a weak and apologetic grin. “Just seems weird, that’s all. I don’t even remember who my real dad was, so I call him Don. Make sense?”

“Not really.”

He put the telephone to his ear, grinning. “Don? Everything okay at home?”

His grin vanished instantly. Alison watched as the color drained from his face. The receiver fell from his hand.

She looked at him anxiously. “What’s wrong?”

But even as the words were leaving her lips, Jonathan was up and running for the door.

Chapter • Three

It took less than ten minutes to run to the Parker house, the place Jonathan had called home for so many years. Jonathan poured on the speed, barely aware that heavy rain was spatting against his face and soaking his uniform. Lightning slashed across the sky, turning the world into a colorless, harshly brilliant fantasy land. Alison was behind him, crying his name again and again, trying uselessly to catch up.

He could see the house four blocks away, but it was not a good sight. Four police cars were parked in disarray on the front lawn, strobing the night with their red and blue lights. The television people were already there, the familiar Channel 8 van parked across the street from the house. There were no ambulances. Bad sign, Jonathan thought as he came to the house. A very bad sign.

His foster father, Don Parker, was waiting for him at the front door, purposely blocking his way. Jonathan tried to pass him, wanting to go in the house, needing to see. Don clutched his arm, holding him back.

“You don’t want to go in there, Jonathan,” he said, dragging Jonathan away from the lights of the television camera. “Nobody should go in there.”

Jonathan tried to shake him off, but Don’s grip remained firm. A policeman came out of the house looking green and woozy, and Jonathan caught a glimpse of the interior before the door was shut. He saw a small hand on the floor, a hand whose fingers were bent and broken. Three of them, pointing in weird angles.

He quit fighting, knowing that he had seen this once before in a nightmare, in a dream. The television camera swung toward him, and under its blinding glare he could see that Don’s face—already deeply carved by sleeplessness and what he had seen before on this case—was now ravaged by grief as well. Jonathan slumped back, stunned.

“Bobby and the new girl? Both of them?”

Don nodded mutely.

“And Mom, too?”

Another nod. Jonathan felt a strange crumpling sensation, as if his body were made of fine glass that was now breaking and falling to pieces, leaving behind nothing but a husk full of shock and horror. He squinted into the camera, wondering if these people, these cops and

reporters, had ever had such a monstrous tragedy come screaming out of nowhere and dump itself on them like burning acid. How could anyone survive this?

Don waved the camera away. “They’re all dead. I wanted to tell you on the phone that you shouldn’t come, that there’s nothing you can do here. Go on home, and we’ll get together tomorrow to figure out what we do next.” He put an arm around Jonathan’s shoulders just as Alison burst out of the dark, panting while rain coursed down her face and the wet mat of her hair.

“Was it—was it the same guy? Did he …” She made useless motions in the air. “Did anyone get killed?”

Don looked over to her like a man awakening from a trance. “They’re all gone,” he said.

“The kids, too?”

He nodded. “Take Jon home, will you? There’s nothing here for him.”

She went to Jonathan and rubbed his arms, as if to put the feeling back in them. Jonathan stared at her glumly.

“Come on,” she said. “I’ll walk with you.”

“My mom,” he mumbled. “She was the best.”

A reporter jumped between Jonathan and Don, wagging his microphone in front of Don’s face. “Lieutenant Parker, please tell us—with the killer now murdering your own family, do you think this will intensify your so-far unsuccessful search for the identity of the killer?”

Jonathan spun around, suddenly full of helpless fury. He grabbed the reporter by the shoulders and turned him around, ready to pretend this fool was a tackle dummy about to be creamed, but Don made a motion and two uniformed cops hauled the reporter back into the dark.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” Don said. “You go get some sleep.”

“Fat chance of that,” Jonathan muttered, and let Alison lead him away.

The day after the funeral Jonathan decided it was time to find out if he was insane or merely psychotic. He called Don and asked him to meet him at a quiet local hangout around noon. Don had agreed, seeming puzzled. Jonathan got there ahead of time, trying to prepare himself, wondering if this was a good move or not. Would Don think he was crazy? Would he laugh in his face, or haul him off to the funny farm?

He sat in a booth with his chin on his hand, idly watching the TV bolted to the wall behind the bar. The midday news report was full of

the year's hottest story, as usual. The anchorman with the funny hair was just going on and on about the murders, and the police department's inability to find a single clue. There was a brief shot of the cemetery, where Jonathan, Alison, Don Parker, and a slew of fellow classmen and well-wishers were somberly watching three coffins lowered into the ground. Jonathan was surprised to suddenly see the camera zoom in on his face, filling the TV with it. He sat straighter, straining to hear.

"Interestingly," the anchorman said, "local college football star Jonathan Parker was also a foster child raised by the couple, after being found beaten and wandering alone alongside a country road when he was just seven years old."

The bar door swung open; Jonathan glanced over and saw Don come in. The bartender saw him too, and hurried to the television to change channels. A screeching heavy-metal rock video began blasting away.

Don came to Jonathan's booth. "Can't go anywhere without hearing about the bastard," he said, and jerked a thumb to the television. "I'm getting tired of listening to that airhead reporter guy." He sat down just as the waitress came over. "Jack Daniel's on the rocks," he said without looking at her. "How about you, Jon? Gonna order a beer so I can arrest you?" He laughed, but there wasn't much conviction in it.

"Just a Coke," Jonathan said, and the waitress walked away. He looked out the window to his left, where a hazy sun was making the wet streets dry again. Thin steam wafted up from the asphalt. He wondered what it must be like for his mother and the two kids, Sally and Bobby, so safe underground for the rest of eternity. What were they turning into? Mold and mush? Human soup?

It was a nauseating thought and he forced it out of his mind. Not enough sleep, barely able to eat, he could feel himself disintegrating under the weight of grief and secret wonderings about his own sanity. Had he really seen it all in a dream? Was running headlong into a goalpost enough to make you a certified psychic? Fortune-telling might be an interesting sideline, twenty-five bucks per session, come one, come all to let the great Jonathini tell you what the future holds. How much did a crystal ball cost nowadays, anyway?

He noticed that Don was staring at him. Jonathan pulled his eyes away from the window, thinking that anything he had to say now was preposterous nonsense. Why not just order a sandwich and call it lunch? It would be easier. Yeah, Don, just wanted to buy you a burger and rehash old memories. Remember the time I stepped on that rake and got whacked in the face? Jeez, did you laugh. So anyway, see ya later.

He leaned closer to Don. “I guess you’re wondering why I called you here.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I guess I do wonder. What’s up?”

Jonathan swallowed, took a breath, knotted his hands on the tabletop, and proceeded to spill the beans. “I dreamed of the murder, Don. Dreamed it just the way it happened.”

Don produced a cigarette and lit it. After a few puffs he shrugged. “It’s not that unusual, Jonathan. Things like this happen, people get bad dreams. I’ve had a few of my own lately.”

“No, I mean I dreamed it the night it happened, before you called. Not only that, I saw what happened in the house.”

Don took another drag of his cigarette. “You don’t know what happened in that house.” He dropped his voice to barely a whisper. “You don’t want to know.”

“Okay, wait a sec. Bobby was killed in the living room. His flashlight was lying right next to him. The fingers on his right hand were broken.”

The waitress came back and laid napkins on the table, then the drinks. Jonathan and Don stared at each other. “Look,” Jonathan said, and raised his right hand. “These three fingers.” He wagged his hand in Don’s face. “You can’t say I’m wrong. Mom and Sally got it up in Sally’s bedroom.”

“Anything else for you two?” the waitress said. “It looks like you both need some joy juice.”

Don waved her away, then leaned hard on the table. “What is this shit, Jonathan? How could you know that?”

Jonathan smiled bitterly. “Then that *is* how it was, isn’t it? Just like I’ve been saying. Right?”

Don’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.” He slugged his drink down in two swallows and wiped his lips with the back of one hand. “Is that the reason you got me down here? Pretty bad joke, son. Pretty bad.”

“No joke at all. This is so weird. I knew it wasn’t just an ordinary dream. It was so real—I could smell the blood, hear the screams. And I know what he looks like. I even know he walks with a limp.”

Don stood up abruptly and tossed a few bills on the table. “Just because I’m your father doesn’t mean I have to listen to this crap. You can do your Rod Serling routine on somebody else.”

He stalked away, grumbling, and went out. Jonathan sprinted after him, caught him on the sidewalk, and grabbed his arm to turn him around. “Dad, listen! I know I’m not—”

Don spun suddenly and pinned Jonathan against the nearest wall,

twisting his arm behind him and hissing in his ear. “What the hell is with you? Are you on drugs or something?”

Jonathan groaned, but managed to say, “Did you find tracks of a truck in the driveway? Did you?”

The pressure on his arm lessened, then fell away entirely. Jonathan turned around, seeing in Don’s eyes that this one had struck home. “I saw it all, Don,” he said. “I even saw his truck.” He frowned as a new memory resurfaced. “God, Don, I saw what was written on the side of the van. His name was on it. I bet I can take you to where he works.”

Don sighed, looking grim and defeated. Then he nodded. “Go ahead and tell me. I’ll check it out.”

Jonathan shook his head. “Sorry, but I’ll have to show you. I want to be in on this.”

“That’s against departmental procedure. You know that.”

“We’ll get him tonight. You do want this guy, don’t you?”

It almost seemed as if Don were ready to smile. He flipped his cigarette into the gutter, where three days of downpour were chugging their way to a sewer grating. The smell of old rain was still heavy in the air.

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” he said. “We’ll do it tonight.”

Night came. So did trouble.

The street was named Claybourne Boulevard, a fancy enough name for an upper-crust English boulevard, or perhaps a street in the ritziest part of Manhattan. For Maryville, Claybourne was a breeding ground for rats and winos, derelicts and drunks. A sodden moon hung in the velvet black of the sky on this night, creating weird shadows and apparitions among the railyards and slum tenements. It was here that Jonathan led Don Parker in an unmarked car, with two black-and-whites close behind. They pulled over to the curb and killed the engines.

Jonathan looked around in the sudden silence, trying to spot something familiar. There was an eerie feeling gnawing at his guts, the sensation that it was here where the terror lurked, and nowhere else. He studied the black hulks of ruined buildings and abandoned railcars, trying to make his eyes adjust from the glare of the headlights.

Don lit a cigarette, filling the car with smoke. “What does the radar say now, son? On the fritz, is it?”

Jonathan shook his head, and pointed. “There it is.”

Don followed his finger. “Over there?”

“There.”

Don clicked his door open and got out, then motioned to the uniformed cops. Two got out of each car, hunkered down low, as if expecting a barrage of machine-gun fire. Jonathan got out too, feeling that same brand of apprehension, the sense of being in an area where terror was commonplace and death lurked behind every shadow. He shivered involuntarily. Death was here indeed, and here its name was Pinker.

"I see it," Don whispered, cocking his head. "Pinker's TV Repair. But hell, Jon, it's closed for the night."

Jonathan sniffed the damp night air as if attempting to smell the evil that lurked there. The only smell was the stench of rotting wood and rusting iron. Yet …

"He's in there," he said, nodding to himself. "Watching."

The other policemen joined them, still tense, their faces creased and hard under the moonlight.

"Alright, it's like I said," Don whispered. "Just a simple look-see here, no pieces out, no bullshit. Far as I know, this guy could be a frigging Eagle Scout."

One of the cops snorted. Jonathan could see the three yellow hash marks on his sleeves, denoting sergeant. He was the only one who looked unafraid. He glanced at Jonathan. "We're actually here because this kid had a bad dream?"

"Don't look at me," Don said. "Besides, you guys volunteered for this. Sergeant, deploy your men."

The sergeant smiled. "Yessir. I can't wait to tell the old lady about *this* one. She'll have a shit-fit."

"Just deploy, okay?"

"Consider us deployed, Lieutenant." He cocked his jaw toward two of the men. "You two, you take the alley over there. Me and Jones, we'll just take us a little stroll. Right, Jonesy?"

Jonesy didn't seem very sure of himself. Even under the weak light of the moon he looked ready to collapse of fright, but obediently followed his sergeant toward an overgrown railroad spur where weeds sprouted in a wild tangle.

Don turned to Jonathan. "This is screwball beyond belief, Jon."

Jonathan shrugged. "Yesterday I might have agreed with you. Maybe I am nuts, but after we talk to this guy we'll know for sure."

"Huh? How?"

"If I'm not nuts, we'll recognize each other from the dream."

Don rolled his eyes, but headed across a weed field with Jonathan tagging behind. After a few moments Jonathan could see a ghostly bluish light streaming out of the windows of a dilapidated tin hut. His

mind jumped back to the dream, the blue lights, the nightmare that followed. He hurried to keep pace with Don, the skin of his back crawling as reality seemed to merge with the dream. The air felt suddenly cold and murky.

They came to the hut, where the sergeant and the rookie cop were already peeking through the gaping holes where windows once were. Don tried the door.

"Locked. We'll come back tomorrow."

Jonathan shook his head, peering inside. More than two dozen television sets were spitting out the bluish image of some gruesome horror show, filling the place with dancing light, all on the same channel. "He's in there," he said. "I can feel him."

Don was quiet for several moments, studying Jonathan. He sighed and turned to the sergeant. "Break in."

The sergeant blinked. "Sir, we got no warrant. That's breaking and entering."

Don let the hint of a smile play across his face. "The place was already broken into. We are investigating an apparent burglary. Get me?"

The sergeant grinned. "You're got, sir. Jones, please open the door."

Jones complied, hurling himself against the flimsy plywood twice before the door swung open, the lock a chunk of old metal surrounded by splintered wood. They tromped inside, squinting at the eerie light the tin walls reflected from the myriad of silent televisions, and inspected every possible hiding spot. After a few minutes Don came over to Jonathan.

"I thought you said he was in here."

Jonathan rubbed his hands together, uncertain and chagrined, no longer sure of anything but the damp night air and the acidic, burned-electric smell the TVs were putting out. "I thought he was," he said miserably. "I could have sworn it."

"I don't fault you," Don said. "I've played hunches before and lost."

Jonathan frowned, pressing his fingertips to his temples. "No, no hunch. He's here. I swear to Christ I don't know where, but he *is* here."

Don leaned against a steel table piled high with ancient television guts. He flipped his cigarette away and lit another. "If it makes you feel any better, we'll hang around for a while and see if the owner comes back. I don't say it's a hunch, though. I just say it's the least we can do, and hell, what harm could it be?"

For Don and Jonathan, no harm at all. But for the others …

… The grumpy sergeant's name was McKay and he was not happy at this moment. The fact that he had mere seconds to live was not on his mind, for it was not on the agenda of his life that he be killed at the ripe young age of forty-three.

He had gotten tired of this whole ridiculous search business long before the others. A few minutes ago he had found a corner in the building that went to nowhere, simply dead-ended at a parts rack, and it was here that he paused long enough to have a smoke and kick back while the others worked this idiot assignment. As he dug a Marlboro out of his back pocket (he would have preferred to keep them in a breast pocket the way most folks do, but departmental regs said you couldn't have any protuberances in your breast pockets), Sergeant McKay once again observed, why in hell did they sew pockets on the damned uniforms in the first place? The point was quite moot, for at the moment he was straightening a crumpled Marlboro into something resembling a cigarette, death was stalking him from behind.

"Dream on, Lieutenant," he muttered, leaning against the shelving and digging in his pocket for his Bic.

He heard muffled footsteps, coming from nowhere, coming from everywhere. He lit his cigarette, straining to hear. Whoever was walking here had one hell of a bum leg. The footsteps were mechanical, somehow strange beyond the apparent fact of the limp. They sounded like something Boris Karloff would do in a Mummy movie. Stomp-scraaape. Stomp-scraaape.

He flipped ashes onto the floor.

A hand smashed through the parts rack, a hand dark with bizarre tattoos. It clamped over McKay's mouth just as he was bringing his cigarette back up.

A section of the parts shelving swung open. McKay was jerked backward, his eyes bulging with mad fear, his feet flailing and his face going rapidly purple.

The shelving swung back to normal.

Sergeant McKay's whole day was ruined.

If there could be such a thing as a dying, unheard scream, Jonathan was on the same wavelength as McKay when the sergeant died. Jonathan was startled out of a weary slouch into full military attention, cocking his head, hearing things echo away and away to nothing. And above that, grim, mocking laughter, as near and as real as the floor under his feet. He sprinted to the other side of the building, following those echoes, following that obscene laughter.

He came to the short hallway that dead-ended in shelves littered

with wires and debris. The hair on the back of his neck prickled as he looked into this hallway to nowhere. He was possessed by the frightful certainty that someone was watching.

Don drew up beside him, looking puzzled. Jonathan pointed a shaking finger at the floor.

A cigarette was lying there, burning with an innocent orange glow.

“Wasn’t one of your men just here?” he demanded.

Don glanced around. “How the hell should I know?”

“Wasn’t that sergeant guy just here? I could swear he was.” He loudened his voice to a cry. “Sergeant! Hey, Sarge! Where’d you go?”

The rookie cop charged across the room and came up behind them, breathless. “Where’s the sarge?”

Jonathan felt abruptly faint. He grabbed the wall for support, staring at the fallen cigarette and the sluice of blood that was flowing on the floor now, a thin red river that engulfed the cigarette and extinguished it with a somber hiss. “Oh, shit,” he breathed. “I knew it.”

Don spun suddenly and grabbed the rookie cop by the shirt. “Call for backup!”

The rookie stared dazedly at the floor and its new varnish of blood, mindlessly staring as if contemplating his own tombstone. Don shook him, and his eyes lost their haze and became normal again.

“Go!” Don shouted.

He went. He was already through the front door when Don shouted again. “Tell the guys out back! Tell them we’ve got a homicide on our —”

But the rookie was gone.

Jonathan and Don threw themselves at the shelving, tossing junk aside by the handful. The sound of clattering parts and smashing television glassware rebounded off the walls, adding a bizarre harmony to the hum of the TVs as they ground out their hideous porno film with that swaying, dancing light that made the metal walls seem electric.

“God damn him,” Don growled, throwing debris over both shoulders. “God damn him to hell.”

Jonathan looked at him, those familiar lines of a face he had grown to love. God damn Pinker yes, you bet. But not quite yet. There was even more to come, once again not for Jonathan or Don, but for …

… He had always hated the night shift part of police work, and he had always hated his own name. Officer Tzeidszick, a name so impossible

to pronounce that he often had difficulty with it himself. For a while, after he was admitted to the police academy, people had tried their best to call him by his true name. Unable to do this, they reduced him to a nickname: Alphabet. But by the time he had graduated and received his assignment, he had acquired a nickname so heinous and hilarious that he had sometimes sworn he would attempt a legal change of name. But that would never stop his fellow officers from calling him … Diseased Dick.

As it happened, Diseased Dick and his partner were out near the end of the alley on this night, staring out across the glittering expanse of Maryville after dark, delighted with the colors and the symmetry of the streetlights, the wink and flash of automobile headlights and taillights as people went about their lives without chaos and without disorder. Because Officer Diseased Dick was a man prone to bad habits, he had within the confines of his uniform shirt a small silver flask of bourbon and a pack of cigarettes, neither, of course, in his breast pockets. Police work might pay lousy and it might be dangerous, but with that flask and those smokes Diseased Dick the cop could handle any emergency.

Except, maybe, this one.

Forty yards behind him a door swung open with the brief chatter of bad hinges, then was eased shut. Footsteps scraped across the weeds and gravel, one footstep solid, the other a rasping irregularity, as if their owner had received a particularly bad war injury. This was not the case, but for Diseased Dick and his partner, it didn't matter anymore.

The footsteps came closer. Stomp-scraaape. Stomp-scraaape. Diseased Dick heard this, but had no way of knowing that the feet in the borrowed shoes belonged to no one on the force anymore.

He turned in the dark with a cigarette in one hand and the flask in the other. Woe unto him if the lieutenant ever found out about this drinking business. Jobs were getting hard to come by in Maryville, and discharged alcoholic cops stood no chance at all. So Diseased Dick pocketed his flask, one of the last things he would do in this life, and tossed his cigarette in the wet weeds in case some fool might breeze by and mistake it for marijuana.

"Who's out there?" he said into the dark. "Sarge? Lieutenant Parker?"

The man doing the stomp-scraaape routine came forward, and in the light of the moon Dick saw the uniform. He turned to his partner, relieved. "One of us," he said, and dug his flask out again. He tipped it to the sky and let the wonderful waters of oblivion slide down his throat. Everybody but the bigwigs on the force knew about this

drinking thing. None would ever snitch on a fellow blueshirt.

He turned again to offer the newcomer a drink. He noticed that this particular officer had pants on that were far too short, flapping practically at his knees. His face was a black mask.

"A little sucky-sucky, partner?" Dick asked, waving the flask so that the cold flat moonlight winked on its shiny surface. "Might warm up the bowels on this chilly night."

He lifted the flask high, smiling, not about to get into any trouble with that pesky rookie Jones. He was young and didn't know the ropes. A little Jim Beam would show him the light.

Jones—Sarge—Lieutenant Parker—who could tell in this light?—lunged forward. Diseased Dick felt something cold and sharp puncture his stomach, but it wasn't pain, really; more like having a sharp icicle pressed into his skin just above the navel. He opened his mouth to ask about this mysterious coldness in his belly, but suddenly hot salt water was in his mouth, an odd regurgitation of something he had not eaten. He chewed on it, this lousy-tasting blood, his eyes wide with wonder, and then the icicle sliced upward to his sternum, allowing his guts to fall out in a heap on his shoes.

He said something unintelligible. It might have been "goodbye" and it might have been "sweet Jesus." It didn't matter. He dropped down with his own knees plopping into his own entrails, staring now with entranced wonder at the pile of gray ropy pudding that had been his insides. Then he fell forward on his face. His flask upended itself in the weeds.

It was easier for his partner. Before he could swing around the knife was at his throat, slicing, cutting, slitting him from ear to ear. He fell beside his old pal Diseased Dick, spurting blood in a pulsating fountain that mingled with the stinking entrails of his former friend.

Together they slumbered, no longer caring about their jobs as cops, no longer worried about anything at all.

Jonathan's groping fingers found a crack in the wall between the rusting metal shelves. He dug his fingernails into it, able to pull it open a crack. "Right here," he shouted at Don, and both of them worked in a frenzy. Reluctantly the hidden door swung open.

The sergeant slid out with it. His skull conked the floor with a sound like a fresh melon being slung against a stone wall. His face was contorted into a portrait of agony; beneath his chin was a throat slit wide open. White cartilage glistened inside. Jonathan turned his head, not wanting to see this, not wanting to smell it. That now-familiar stink of fresh blood assaulted his nostrils and made itself at home in his brain. He realized he was standing in it.

Revolted, he looked into the room the door had opened on. It was full of terrifying occult paraphernalia: pentagrams chalked onto the floor, chains and hooks dangling from the ceiling, a half-dozen dead cats hung by their tails with clothesline.

"Holy Jesus," Don mumbled. "What in the hell have we gotten into?"

Jonathan pointed. "It leads off that way. Can we risk it?"

Don jerked his service revolver out of an unseen holster under his armpit. "You bet your ass we can."

They ran through the tiny house of horrors Pinker had created. A narrow hallway branched off, leading to the alley. They smashed through the door, nearly knocking it off its hinges, and ran down the slick gravel of the alley. Jonathan felt somehow relieved that they hadn't brought a flashlight along; if the two cops were out here they were bound to be dead.

"Over there," Don shouted, and angled left toward a short bluff choked with weeds.

They nearly passed by McKay and his dead partner. It was Don who tripped over the corpses and nearly fell on his face.

They squinted at the ground under the weak moonlight. It wasn't hard to tell—or smell—what had happened.

"Jesus Christ," Don gasped, turning one body over with a foot. "Jesus Christ in heaven."

Headlights snapped on to their left. A motor was gunned to life. In an instant it was roaring past them, a white van with the Pinker logo on its sides, careening wildly down the alley. A mad cackle of laughter trailed it.

"Back to the car!" Don shouted, and they both wheeled in unison to spring the other way. They passed the building, their shoes slapping rapidly on the rutted and potholed street. Jonathan glanced sideways as they passed the tin hut; it was still full of blue light.

Don skidded to a stop, nearly falling again. Jonathan heard him suck in a loud, horrified breath.

A uniformed cop was splayed across the windshield of Don's car, the radio mike still in one hand. The cord had been cut and wrapped around his neck. His dead eyes reflected moonlight like two small mirrors set in his dead face.

All of the tires on the car were flat, as if they had been punctured or … slashed.

Jonathan looked to the other two cars, the black-and-whites. Both were sitting on dead tires. The radio mikes had been cut and tossed onto the street.

“Holy shit!” Don shouted. “That monster killed them all!”

Panting, Jonathan nodded. “Maybe if I can—”

Don spun around, his face taut with anger. “You stay out of this! This is police business—*my* business! That maniac killed four of my men, and you think you can mess with him because of one lousy dream! I hate to say this, Jon, but *keep your nose where it belongs!”*

He turned and ran back to the hut, muttering something about finding a phone. Jonathan watched him go, his jaw hanging open in surprise. He had brought Don here, convinced him against all odds that the dream was real. And now he was being told to stay out of it. It was absurd and it was wrong.

Jonathan began to walk home. Stay out of police business? No way. No way in hell. The terror had just begun.

Chapter • Four

At eight o'clock the following morning, Alison was awakened by the clanging of Jonathan's ancient alarm clock. She opened her eyes long enough to see him lean over the side of the bed and sling the clock against the nearest wall. It thumped to the floor and died with a dismal rattle. He fell back onto the bed, yawning.

Alison joined him, arching her back and listening to the pleasant crackling of her spine. It looked like a glorious morning outside.

"Copycat," he quipped, smiling at her. He leaned over for a good-morning kiss. Alison pushed him away.

"No one is allowed to smell my breath before I get a chance to brush my teeth. That includes you most of all."

He laughed. "Good. I've always hated those TV shows where they wake up and start drooling all over each other." He licked his lips, grimacing. "Last one to the bathroom is a human hairball."

Alison sat up, ready to race. Jonathan leaned over and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Give me another peek at those itty-bitty titties before you go."

She slapped him lightly on the head. "Let me go, you pervert. And they aren't itty-bitty, either."

He kissed her on the back while his hands sneaked up to cup her breasts. Alison slapped at them, too. "You're hurting me, you octopus. Let go of me."

He gave her one parting squeeze, then let go. "You can be first to the bathroom, baby. That way I get to sneak a peek at those luscious buns."

She stood up, dragging a sheet from the bed and wrapping herself in it. "Nothing's free in this life, Jonny-boy. You'll have to get your kicks on the Playboy Channel."

His eyes narrowed suddenly. "Crank on the TV, will you? I want to see the guy in the wig tell the world how botched up things were last night. Can you believe it? Four cops dead. They're going to need the FBI to find that bastard now. He's probably two states away and still cruising."

Alison took a step toward the television. Her right foot came down hard on something. "Oops," she said. "I think your remote control just bought the farm." She bent down and picked it up. "Did it used to

work?”

“Far as I know. Punch the power button.”

She did. The television crackled a bit before the picture came on, but when it did there were the familiar face and wig of Walker Stevens, ace reporter who generally tossed his lunch at the sight of blood. He looked positively ill.

“Crank the sound up,” Jonathan said. “The button on the bottom.”

She did as ordered, not really wanting to hear anything more about the slasher, wishing he would just go away and never come back. Hopefully he was two states away, as Jonathan said, tooling along I-70 in Illinois, headed for the West Coast, California or something, where mass murders were not uncommon.

The sound came up, too loud. She backed it down.

“… storm clouds are moving in once more, although today might provide a temporary respite from the rain. But it doesn’t help for the sun to come out for a city afraid to unlock its windows. Last night a man thought to be the long-sought-after slasher was surrounded by police, only to escape in a burst of new killing that left four officers dead and a police department in shock.”

Jonathan ran both hands through his hair. “God, what a mess. You should have seen it.”

Alison shook her head. “No thanks.”

“… His name is Horace Pinker. A virtual phantom until yesterday, he was identified at last through a most unusual means. According to a police spokesman, a young man named Jonathan Parker had a dream about the killer, a dream that proved to be correct. Was it ESP, extrasensory perception, or was it blind luck? In either case, it gave Maryville’s police department the first solid lead in what previously had been an unsolvable case.”

Jonathan looked up glumly at Alison. “Swell,” he said. “Now I’m famous all over again. Do you suppose anybody wants my autograph?”

Alison shrugged. “That’s doubtful, but I think you ought to be careful from now on. If that guy is still around he might …”

Jonathan cocked his head. “Might what?”

She shrugged again, feeling sheepish and stupid. “Might try to … get you.”

To her surprise, Jonathan did not laugh. Instead he nodded. “I suppose it’s possible. But this morning I have football practice, at least. I think a couple dozen guys could nail the creep if he shows up.”

“Practice?” Alison said, disappointed. “I wanted to cook you a good breakfast.”

He got out of bed. “I can’t eat before a practice, or else I get queasy in the old tum-tum.”

She smiled. “All right, Jon-Jon. Tonight I’ll make you a fabulous supper.” She turned toward the doorway.

“Hold on a minute,” Jonathan said. “Before you disappear into the bathroom, never to be seen again, I’ve got something I want you to see.” He bent down and fished a small black jewelry box from the floor, then handed it to her. “Happy birthday, Alison.”

Her jaw almost dropped wide open. “You didn’t forget? Even with everything that’s been going on, you remembered?”

“Looks that way.” He gave her a wink. “If you don’t like it, please spare my feelings. I’m easily wounded.”

She flipped the lid up. Inside was a delicate gold chain with a small heart at the center. In the morning light flooding through the room’s single window it seemed to sparkle like golden fire. Even the smell drifting out of the open box cried *money*. Alison felt tears welling up in her eyes. Not many of her previous boyfriends had been so thoughtful.

“Well?”

She smiled, and let the sheet fall away. “Put it on me,” she said, lifting her hair with one hand. “I swear I’ll wear it forever.”

“Good deal,” Jonathan said, accepting the box. He lifted the chain out and hung it around her neck, fought a brief battle with the clasp, then adjusted it so that the heart hung below her throat. He stood back, admiring her from head to foot, obviously more interested in her feminine charms than the charm itself.

Alison giggled. “You seem to be growing, Jon.”

He looked down. “Happens to the best of us now and then. Care for a quickie?”

“Quickie what?”

He rolled his eyes. “Ah, these young ladies nowadays. Do you want to bear my children, or not?”

“Not right now. Remember the bad breath?”

“I’ll wear my gas mask.”

“I’m still sore from last night.”

“I’ve got Band-Aids.”

“Funny.” She wrapped herself back in the sheet. “You’d better use the bathroom first. I have to take a shower.”

He grinned at her. “All right. We’ll save ourselves for tonight. What time is it, anyway?”

“You’re the jerk who set the alarm for eight. When does your

practice start?"

"Nine-thirty."

"Why so early, then?"

He pointed to the window. "Have you seen my car lately? It only starts every other Thursday. That's why I had to run in the rain when Don called about—"

She pressed two fingers to his lips. "Let's let the past go for now, Jon. What's done is done."

"Sure," he said, a little too quickly, a little too quietly.

Alison put her arms around his neck and pulled him close, enveloping both of them in the bed sheet. "Here's my version of a quickie," she whispered, and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Jeezo," he barked, pulling away. "Attack of the killer breath germs! Get thee hence, woman, and brusheth your teeth! Yucko!"

She made a face at him. "Forget tonight, bozo. You just made me mad."

"Mad like angry, or mad like a dog?"

"Both."

"Well then," he said, "I guess this won't hurt."

He grabbed her and planted his lips over her mouth. She felt his tongue slip between her teeth in an apparent effort to tickle her tonsils. This time she pushed him away, laughing when he bounced on the bed and flipped over to the floor.

"Still want to race?" she asked.

He shot to his feet. "Damn right."

She chuckled. "Oh, Jon?"

"Yeah?"

"You're shrinking on me."

He clutched his crotch with both hands and darted for the door, hopping from foot to foot.

Alison sat on the bed, laughing into her hands and the sheet that still smelled of last night and things they had done in the dark. "Jesus," she whispered to herself. "Jesus God, I think I'll love him for the rest of my life."

She was right.

By nine o'clock Jonathan was dressed and gone, Alison was alone and pleased to be that way, wanting only to take a shower, put on her old stale clothes, and get home to change. Then she would go to the college and watch the football practice and its star, one Jonathan Parker, flanker headed for the pros and sure stardom.

She was singing in the shower, some old song that had popped into her head, Dire Straits, Sultans of Swing, or some such. Where the words were lost to memory she hummed, glad to be here in this dinky apartment Jonathan called home, already anxious to see him again, wondering if his medicine cabinet held any deodorant that was fit for a woman to use.

When she was done and snagged a towel off the chrome bar outside the tub, dried her face and shook the water out of her hair, then stepped out, making a nice wet mess on the ceramic-tile floor while she dried herself off. In a stroke of sudden panic she wondered if the bathroom contained a hair dryer, because her hair had a disgusting tendency to curl and frizz if it dried too slowly. She dried her feet off, hung the towel over a shoulder, and began to scout through the bathroom cabinets. The air was thick with heat and steam. And, perhaps, something else.

She found the dryer after a minute, found a brush that seemed usable, plugged the dryer in, then went to work on her hair. The dryer was some ancient thing Jonathan must have purchased in junior high, a made-in-Korea job that made more noise than a 747 jet taking off. Bending and swaying, she allowed the alien dryer to do its work, wishing it made more heat and less noise.

Over its jet-engine howl she heard something outside the bathroom. She clicked the dryer off, straining to hear as its Korean motor wound down to nothing. In the silence a voice drifted through the door.

"I thought I was getting my clothes clean, until my best friend told me the truth …"

Commercial on television. Nothing more.

She pulled the door open and went to the TV. Some registered idiot was frothing and foaming over a new laundry detergent. She turned the TV off.

She went back into the bathroom. She turned the dryer back on, grimacing at its outrageous screeching howl. In the mirror she noticed how beautiful the necklace was, noticed the way it caught the light and sent it shooting in multiple directions, a tiny heart made of fresh love and the possibility of marriage.

You're going nuts, she told herself, not quite believing it, not exerting any effort to tame the emotion.

"I'm in love," she told her reflection in the mirror. "How's that for fast action?"

Something moved behind her, almost too fast to see in the reflection of the mirror. She tried to turn around, tried to, but a huge cold hand mashed itself over her mouth. In the steamy mirror she could see only the glittering eyes of a madman behind her, a creature full of insanity

and hate, its eyes slitted like the eyes of a dragon. She saw tattoos on the back of his hand, but then her need to breathe overcame her fright, a hugely powerful need to get fresh cool air inside her lungs, and she squirmed uselessly under the madman's grip.

He dragged her to the bathtub. Her heels squeaked briefly on the tiles.

He lifted his hand to let her breathe. She scooped lungfuls of breath into her mouth, quaking with fear, thinking vaguely of rape, and torture, and murder.

She was aware of the man bending down to close the drain in the tub. She was aware of water splashing into the tub. She was aware that she was very naked, and as helpless as a man tied to a firing-squad stake.

Time passed, just a little time, just enough time to let the tub fill up, and then Alison was busy with other pesky problems, topmost on the list a screaming desire to stay alive.

Sometimes wishes never come true.

By late afternoon Jonathan was dodging a tackle on the field of trampled grass the university liked to call the stadium, when he saw Coach Cooper on the sidelines talking to his father. Without Alison around to divert him, Jonathan had done remarkably well today, catching passes, outdodging the big man Rhino and his sidekick Bruno, mostly fulfilling his job as the team's brightest hope. Though he had looked into the stands again and again between plays, there had been no sign of Alison. A small knot of worry gripped his stomach, but then he decided she had gone home and fallen asleep. The night had been extremely hard on her.

Jonathan laughed at himself. Hard on. Somebody call Henny Youngman.

Coach Cooper let out a shrill blast on his whistle, indicating break time. Most of the players wandered toward the snack shack, pulling their helmets off and wiping the sweat off their hair, talking and laughing. Jonathan stuck his helmet under his arm, looking around once more for Alison. No such luck. The worry threatened to grip him again, that gnawing bit of certainty that something terrible was waiting to happen. He tried to will it away but it hung on just the same.

The coach motioned him over. Jonathan broke into a trot, feeling his guts clench tight as he looked at his father's face and saw the grimly determined eyes of a man who has horrible news to break. Jonathan's trot became a run; now the coach looked pained, as if someone had been so kind as to hit him over the head with a blunt

object. Jonathan came to a halt in front of them, already knowing, already knowing.

He swallowed hard. “Is she—is she—”

Don Parker seemed about ready to collapse. He put a heavy hand on Jonathan’s shoulder pad. “I swear,” he said. “I swear if I could change what happened, I’d …”

But Jonathan was already running toward his car, his mind a whirlwind of panic and dreadful certainty.

For a change his battered Chevy started on the first try.

There was an ambulance parked in front of his apartment. There were three police cars, their lights flashing and pulsing with today’s red and blue bad news. A group of spectators had assembled on the lawn, a football huddle of gawkers and snoops. Jonathan jammed both feet on the brake to stop with a scream of old tires and a cloud of burned-rubber smoke. He dived out of the car and was running again, dodging cars, dodging people, dodging cops. A blueshirt tried to stop him at the front door but he charged through him, sending the cop skidding on his back through the hallway. Jonathan burst into his apartment where last night he and Alison had made love, where he and Alison had shared secrets, giggled in the dark, talked of college and life and the secrets their combined futures might hold. All of that was now memory and nothing more.

A few cops were blocking the bathroom door. An ambulance attendant dressed in whites was leaning against the living room wall, casually picking his fingernails. Somewhere, water was splashing. The carpet was dark with it.

“Alison!” Jonathan screamed, startling the cops. He ran between them, knocking them aside, managing to skid on the bathroom tiles and crash against the sink, where his trusty Korean hair dryer was bellowing its foreign music into the drain. He pushed himself back, stupidly thinking that Alison had decided to paint the bathroom red. Please God let it be that. But no, the walls were smeared with blood the way a child in some mad kindergarten spree might smear red paint on the walls, paint that dripped and ran, blood that dripped and ran. The smell of it was heavy in the air.

Someone grabbed him from behind. He noticed the familiar smell of the after-shave Don Parker used, and struggled to get away, gurgling obscenities, ready to kill anyone who would dare keep him from …

Alison?

. . . she was in the bathtub, where a steady tide of pink water surfed over the rim and splashed on the floor. Jonathan could see her hand,

languidly draped over the stark white porcelain of the tub's rim, a hand that was china white now, pale as a death shroud. Above her, stark, crimson, and splattered on the wall were words written in the smeared blood of the girl he had loved in the night and joked with in the morning. The girl who had sworn to bear his children.

JONATHAN—HAPPY BIRTHDAY—HORACE PINKER!

He let his father pull him away. There was too much to see, too much red, too much pink, too much white.

pink

pinker

horace pinker

He felt himself standing at the cliff edge of insanity as Don dragged him away from the horror that had occurred in the bathroom. And well, why not? How much terror can the human mind experience before a fuse or two blow and blot out reason? How can it be prevented?

Only one way came to mind as Jonathan was hauled into the living room and dumped on the couch with his shoulder pads rattling like old bones. Only one way to fight this horror.

It was time to get mad. Time to get very, very mad.

Mad like angry, or mad like a dog?

Jonathan felt something harden inside him, a determination that Horace Pinker would die much the same as Alison had. Very, very much the same.

Mad like a dog, then. He had no problem with that.

No problem at all.

No More Mister Nice Guy.

Chapter • Five

The funeral was awful. Jonathan, dressed in a fine and proper suit, sat during the ceremony with a lump in his throat that had nothing to do with the knot of his tie, which he had managed to jerk into an unrecognizable ball about the size of an orange. He endured the hour-long ceremony though, not caring how disheveled he might look, endured it and went with the procession of cars to the cemetery.

The burial was awful. The coffin was closed, and stayed that way while a Presbyterian minister droned on about the glories to be found in heaven. Jonathan doubted it. If heaven was so great, why not just nuke the planet and send everybody off to a fabulous and cost-free eternity? It didn't make much sense. Neither did anything else.

The coffin was lowered. Jonathan felt like screaming. For God's sake, his mind echoed over and over again. For God's sake, she's only nineteen!

God didn't mind. The coffin was cranked down into its cement liner, the lid of the liner lowered with ropes, and Jonathan had the awful pleasure of tossing in the first handful of dirt.

Awful. Awful awful awful. He couldn't eat. He couldn't sleep without waking up in the night with tears just this side of his eyeballs and a scream of denial building behind his lips. The days stunk. The nights were, well … awful. Jonathan felt pale and weak and hopeless, waiting for that internal nuclear bomb to ignite and send him to Horace Pinker. Waiting for the grief to leave him long enough so that he could get mad.

And it happened, finally. Walker Stevens, that daring reporter with fake hair and no stomach for blood, let the people of Maryville know that yes, our pal Horace had struck again. Family of six. A toddler had been nailed to a door. They found a six-year-old stuffed up the chimney. Dad was missing entirely. Eventually he would be found on the roof, dismembered, his arms and legs plugging up the guttering, his head lounging in the old birdbath behind the house where the yard ended and the weed fields began. Pretty nifty stuff.

Jonathan decided enough was enough. He called Rhino. He laid out the plan. Rhino listened. Rhino told him he was crazy. Jonathan begged. Rhino said okay.

It might have been Saturday, maybe Friday. Jonathan did not know and did not care. His blood was hot, his energy up. Sweat was beading

on his forehead and back, making his shirt sticky as he drove his wreck to Rhino's house.

Jonathan scooted over to the passenger's side. Rhino got in behind the steering wheel. Jonathan could see his face register amazement that the ancient Chevy was actually running, at least on a few cylinders. Rhino turned his head and looked into Jonathan's eyes.

"What are you high on? Got some PCP in the old brain, or what?"

Jonathan returned his stare. "You do know what to do, don't you?"

Rhino smirked. "Easiest job I ever had. Question is, *why?*"

"Just drive."

Rhino, all 220 pounds of him, rocked the seat into a different position so that his knees were not scraping the steering wheel. He dumped the Chevy into first and headed out. It was dusk, the sky a smear of orange and pink, threatening to exchange day for a swift new night. Rhino popped the headlights on. "Any particular place, my boy?"

"Sure. Wherever your heart leads you."

Rhino grunted amicably. "It's your gas, Jon. How's the ESP tonight? Functioning?"

Jonathan leaned back and propped his feet on the dash. "One hundred percent, Rhino. Just drive."

Rhino nodded. "Sweet dreams, Jon. I'm only charging five bucks an hour."

"Eat shit."

"Six an hour for that, and you supply the ketchup."

Jonathan almost laughed. "Shut up, you big turd."

The big turd chuckled. "Alright. Just don't let the bedbugs bite."

Jonathan closed his eyes and brought up a vision of tattooed arms and a face that would frighten a blind man. All he could see was the beauty that had been Alison's face on a morning two days ago, when the chief mortician closed the lid on Alison and shut her light away forever.

And so they cruised, Rhino pretty much amazed and mystified by all this funny business, Jonathan determined to show Alison what true love meant, even if it meant dying for her.

Four hours later the gas was almost gone and Rhino was obviously getting tired of driving all the back roads Maryville had to offer. He pulled over to a darkened curb, where the street signs indicated that they were at the intersection of Maddalena Street and Wagner Avenue. Rhino killed the lights and shut the motor off.

"My ass aches," he groaned.

Jonathan sat straighter, watching the blank slate of the dark outside, listening behind the tick of the Chevy's cooling engine for a signal, a light, a sound, anything. He frowned suddenly. Something was thumping. The sound seemed to come from a thousand miles away.

"Illinois?" he murmured. "Two states away, like she said?"

The thumping went on. Below it came the rasp of heavy breathing.

Jonathan cracked his door open and got out. A moist night breeze tugged at his hair, making him squint. On the far side of Wagner Avenue was a ruined apartment building, its brick sides pitted and discolored by the years, some of its doors gaping open and black. To the right was a tiny flicker of color.

He started toward it at a slow jog, checking over his shoulder once to make sure this was all real, aware of his Reeboks slapping the sidewalk and gritting on the cast-off trash and debris the wind had deposited there. He thought he saw Rhino wave. Then the way back was fully black.

He came to an open doorway and peered inside. Warm air wafted out, laden with the stench of old diapers and rotting wood. Jonathan shivered involuntarily as he went into the building. This place was most decidedly not the Ritz.

But the thumping was coming from upstairs. And the breathing. And—perhaps—the sound of screams.

He took the steps three at a time. They creaked and muttered under his weight, groaning from age and rot. He came to the landing. Dim light shafted down a long and musky hallway. The smell of dead carpets and ruined plaster was overpowering. It seemed as though Jonathan could hear the cockroaches scurrying around inside the walls, breeding, eating, festering with decay. His stomach performed a slow, queasy roll.

The thumping was coming from his left. Also the screams. Also the breathing. Also a low, animal growl.

Pinker. Trying to smash a door down.

Jonathan grinned, his face twisting up with raw hate. Here also now was Jonathan, about to show Pinker what was what.

He took two steps. A shadow bulked up ahead, some huge thing trying to crash through an apartment door. Jonathan's heart jumped into high gear.

"Pinker!" he shouted as loud as he was able. His throat was pulsing with anticipation.

The shadow ceased throwing itself at the door, then wheeled

around.

Jonathan felt a hot surge of adrenaline pump through his veins. His hands became fists. “Come on, you bastard! Take me on!”

The voice that came out of the shadow was deep, husky, almost like some prehistoric animal growling with rage and hate. *“You got it, asshole!”* it screamed, and the shadow that was Pinker lunged at Jonathan.

Jonathan took a huge breath as Pinker bore down on him. *“Rhino! Rhino, now!”*

Nothing happened. No Rhino at the other end of the hall, no 220 pounds of meat and sinew. No Rhino at all. Hadn’t that been the plan? Hadn’t it? Jonathan took a wild side step, his brain feeling queerly drained. Pinker shot past, smelling of sweat and hate, the long blade of his slashing knife catching a bit of light and throwing dim pinpoints into Jonathan’s eyes. He saw Pinker turn. The killer’s teeth gleamed a loathsome puke yellow. Jonathan caught a whiff of something hideous on the outrush of his breath, a smell like old potatoes left to putrefy in a dank cellar. God only knew what his last meal had been. Chunks of Alison? Highly possible.

“Try again,” Jonathan hissed at him. “Make my nightmare.”

Pinker lunged. Jonathan caught the muscled slabs of his forearms, forearms slick with sweat, and held the knife away from his own throat by sheer strength of will. Pinker laughed in his face, this time blowing out a perfumed breath that was exactly the perfume Alison had been wearing when she was … killed.

Alison.

Jonathan shoved Pinker backward against the stairwell’s banister, amazed at his own strength, at the same time screaming for Rhino. Pinker’s mad cackling filled the hallway again. Still no Rhino. Jonathan lashed out with both fists, hoping to connect with this laughing monstrous demon, needing to, but Pinker lunged again. Jonathan could only cringe away and scream, madly batting at the air, knowing that the knife was slashing down, waiting for it to slice through his hands or his arms or …

He began to shake, not out of terror or helplessness, simply began to shake as if he were a rag doll in the hands of a kindergarten bullyboy. Pinker’s insane laughter hammered his eardrums, filling his head with echoes and madness, then drifted away …

… and Rhino was there, shouting in his face, dragging him back to consciousness, cuffing the side of his jaw to make him wake up. Jonathan’s eyes jerked open, unable to focus, seeing a carnival world

of lights and darks and colors.

"Jon!" Rhino bellowed in his face. "Just wake up!"

Jonathan looked at him. They were nose to nose, Rhino looking pale and afraid in the flashing glow of a neon sign that proclaimed, simply, Maryville Bar & Grill.

Jonathan pushed Rhino away and sat up, shielding his eyes from the flashing blues and yellows of the bar sign. They were in the parking lot. Maryville's main street was behind them, arrowing its way toward Cleveland.

"Are you among the living again?" Rhino asked worriedly. "I've been pounding you awake for two minutes."

Jonathan put on a smile. "Yeah, and you did fine, old buddy. It was weird, but it was worth it."

Rhino took a look at his watch. "Jesus, it's almost two and I gotta get to bed. Want me to drop you off at home? I'll give you the car back tomorrow."

"No way," Jonathan said. "There's still something I have to do."

"This late?"

"I'll dump your ass off at home. Okay?"

Rhino yawned. "Nah, screw it. I'm with you all the way."

"Good. Do you know where the intersection of Maddalena Street and Wagner Avenue is?"

"I think so."

"Then haul ass. Time's running out."

Rhino started the car, and they headed east. The city was dead this time of night, but people were waiting. Eyes were watching.

Four cars followed, making no sound, making no light.

They came to the intersection fifteen minutes later, Jonathan and Rhino, Jonathan peering at the dark, trying to orient himself, Rhino sidling up to the curb and killing the motor. Jonathan stepped out, frowning, looking for something familiar.

"Well?" Rhino asked, yawning hugely.

Jonathan shrugged. "This looks like the place, I think. But where's the light?"

Rhino stepped out of the car. "Swear this isn't a put-on, Jon. Sometimes practical jokes seem to—"

He was interrupted by distant wail of a woman screaming. The noise seemed to grow and grow until it filled the night. Then it was gone, a mere echo booming down the deserted streets.

"Holy shit," Jonathan breathed, feeling his heart speed up. He took

a step and was suddenly engulfed in a glaring wash of light. He turned, squinting.

Four cars drew up to the curb. The lead car had its headlights on now. It stopped, and Lieutenant Don Parker got out. "Evening, Jon," he said, smiling. "Out for a little drive?"

Jonathan shielded his eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"My job."

The woman screamed again. For a crazy moment Jonathan wondered if he was still dreaming all of this, a nightmare that repeated itself endlessly. He dug his fingernails into his palms hard enough to draw blood.

Nothing changed. Don Parker shouted to the cars behind, and a small squad of uniformed officers piled out. He pointed at one of them. "Keep these two kids here!" he shouted, then raced off toward the ramshackle apartment building with his men close behind.

Jonathan looked at Rhino. Rhino gave him a small nod of his head, then charged at the officer who had been assigned to keep them out of the action. Years of football training served him well. The cop flipped head over heels and went sprawling. Jonathan winced at the sound his head made when it thumped the street. That guy would have one hell of a headache when he came back to life.

They ran to the building. The cops were jamming themselves up the narrow stairwell. Rhino elbowed them aside, clearing a path for Jonathan. Together they thundered up the steps and broke through to the landing.

Don had his service revolver out, holding it with both hands. The screaming went on and on, shrill and loud. In the dim light spilling through a door that had been rammed to pieces, Jonathan caught a glimpse of a woman in a flimsy nightgown. She was running from the huge and shambling creature that was visible only as a shadow behind her, but then a darkly tattooed arm was slung around her neck, dragging her backward.

Don shouted at him. "Freeze, you bastard, or I'll blow your head off!"

Pinker hauled the woman in front of himself as a shield, aiming his knife at her throat. He was grinning. "Take your best shot, bud. She won't mind." His wild eyes flicked over to Jonathan. "You just *had* to bring Daddy along, didn't you? Well, Jonny-boy, take *this!*"

He threw the woman. She smashed into Don, knocking him down the stairwell, and together they tumbled down the steps, knocking the other policemen askew. Pinker turned and ran, laughing in a series of whoops and screeches. Jonathan saw him disappear, bouncing up and

down as he dragged his dead foot behind. He raced after him, past the ruined door into darkness, guided only by that hideous laughter.

His feet encountered more stairs, nearly tripping him. Pinker was laughing from above now. Jonathan sprinted up, taking the stairs three at a time. He heard wood thunk against wood, and got a brief glimpse of stars. He nodded internally. Trapdoor to the roof, that simple. Pinker was no dummy.

The trapdoor slammed shut, sifting dust down in a fine powder. Using both hands, Jonathan pushed it open again. Night air drafted down, cool against his sweating face. He caught the edges of the opening and hauled himself up. A cold slice of moon was suspended in the velvet sky, beaming just enough light for him to see. The roof was flat, smelling of old tar. Television antennas sprouted out in places, most broken or wobbling, a forest of elderly aluminum and rusting bolts. Jonathan hoisted himself fully out, looking around.

Pinker was doing a weird tightwire act off to the right, his arms waving and flapping as he crossed a fifteen-foot-wide chasm to the next building. Jonathan sprinted toward him, frowning, not knowing what kind of trick this was, hoping to hell that Pinker would fall. He skidded to a stop at the building's edge just as Pinker reached the other side.

An ancient wooden ladder was lying across the two buildings, spanning the gap. Jonathan hesitated only a moment, then put a foot on the first rung. He was no daredevil, but if Pinker could cross it with a bum leg, Jonathan could do even better.

As he put his weight on the rung the ladder was jerked away, nearly making him fall. He pinwheeled his arms for balance as the ladder helicoptered down to crash on the ground below. Pinker laughed, doing a mad little victory dance on his good leg. Then he turned and staggered away, still howling with joy.

Jonathan nearly screamed. What was the old saying? So near, yet so far? Jesus, what a life. Jonathan ground his teeth in helpless frustration and rage. He could see Pinker limping across the opposite rooftop, dragging his bad leg, with his macabre laughter, a mixture of screams and whoops, trailing behind him. He came to a hump on the roof, where Jonathan could make out, dimly, a door. Pinker tried the knob, thumped a fist against the door, then quit laughing.

Jonathan heard movement behind him. He whirled around. Don Parker emerged from the trapdoor, his head swiveling as he surveyed the rooftop. Rhino popped up behind him, followed by six cops. Don ran to Jonathan, looking mad enough to kill. And if it was Pinker who caught the blunt edge of his rage, Jonathan thought, the more the better.

“Did you see him?” Don shouted. “Where did he go?”

Jonathan pointed to the next building, where Pinker was ramming himself against the door, moaning and groaning, no longer quite the happy lunatic he had been before.

Don waved a hand at his men. “Go back down,” he barked. “Cover that building! We won’t lose him this time!”

They scurried to the trapdoor one by one, lowering themselves down with agonizing slowness. Jonathan could tell by the sound of the door Pinker was pounding against that he was about to burst through. It was then that he made up his mind. No fifteen feet of dead airspace could stop him from killing the maniac who had killed and killed.

He ran to the trapdoor, where the last cop was trying to get down. He turned, took a quick lungful of cool air, crouched down as he had crouched so many times in football. He noticed Rhino off to the side, a man big enough to be a wrecking ball, but a man with enough heart to stop a friend from killing himself.

Jonathan spurted forward, his eyes on the far building, judging it, assessing it, knowing he needed more speed than an Olympic broad jumper. He saw the look in Rhino’s widening eyes, and knew from instinct that this might be the final hurdle of his life. No one—no Don Parker, no Rhino, no Pinker—no one could stop him.

He charged across the roof, wishing his Reeboks had cleats. Rhino shouted something about getting killed. Jonathan almost grinned. Only one man would die this time, and his name would be Pinker.

Rhino charged him, shouting. Jonathan zipped past him as Rhino thumped hard on the roof, a missed tackle, a missed last opportunity. Then the edge was there and Jonathan was Superman, a man endowed with powers that would amaze even himself, flying across the chasm, the alley far below filled with debris and overstuffed dumpsters and one smashed ladder. His flailing feet caught on cold wet tar and he was on the other side, skidding on his stomach through puddles of black water and pigeon shit.

Pinker was still hurling himself at the locked door. Jonathan got to his feet, his face dripping water in large shiny beads, a face twisted up with hot anger and cold determination. He was determined that Pinker would die right now. He launched himself at the pale shadow that was Pinker, hoping to ram him through the door he was so desperately banging on, dump him into the unknown bowels of this decrepit building and smash him to pieces wherever he ended, heaven or hell, or maybe a special purgatory reserved for all the mass murderers who had shown their talent in the last fifty years.

All of this occurred in a tiny fragment of time, when Jonathan was

airborne and cruising toward Pinker. Pinker turned, but too late. Jonathan smashed into him headfirst, knocking him backward with so much force that Pinker's head made a dent the size of a hubcap in the wet and brittle tar. He groaned once and was still.

Jonathan jumped to his feet, panting, wiping the conglomeration of stale water and sweat from his face. Pinker looked very dead. Jonathan went to him and kicked lightly at his leg.

No reaction.

Jonathan frowned. Could it be this easy? How could the slayer of thirty or more people be coldcocked by a roof made of cracks and ancient tar? His instincts told him no. He bent down to snatch the knife out of Pinker's hand, and Pinker lunged up with a frightening shriek, swinging the knife in horizontal swipes, aiming for Jonathan's eyes. For a moment the moon was reflected in Pinker's eyes, two white crescents wild with hate, the eyes of a madman. Jonathan lurched backward, getting jabbed in the back by antennas, almost falling. Pinker sprang up and advanced on him with the knife.

Jonathan turned and tried to tear an antenna away from its rusted moorings. Metal that had not been touched in thirty years screeched and groaned, the bolts popped, and then it was Jonathan's, his antenna and his only defense. He swung it as Pinker lashed out, making sparks jump in crazy streaks as antenna met knife, feeling absurdly that he had grabbed a strange Christmas tree as a weapon. Pinker hacked again, two times, three. Sparks jumped off his blade. He began to cackle.

Jonathan backed into a ventilator of some sort, a giant made of sheet metal and rusty screws. Pinker lunged. Jonathan threw the antenna in his face and ducked behind the ventilator.

Pinker hurled the antenna aside with his laughter building to a lunatic's scream. He stuck his oversize knife through the thin metal of the ventilator, then pulled it back with the noise of wounded metal howling loud and sharp. He began to hack the thing to pieces, laughing, grunting, slashing.

Jonathan duck walked around the shaft, his heart pounding in his chest and his breath squeaking through his throat. The man was absolutely insane. He was so intent on his work as the demolisher of ventilator ducts that he didn't notice when Jonathan's moonshadow fell across him. Jonathan used the opportunity to lunge at him with all the force of a linebacker. Pinker fell on his back with a meaty thump, but when Jonathan recovered and got to his feet, Pinker was already up, weaving from side to side like a snake, his knife glittering savagely under the naked glow of the moon.

He lunged. Jonathan fell back. Another antenna pricked his back.

He wanted to turn, suddenly desperate to live, falling back from that slashing blade and the unpleasant whooshing sound it made as it cut the air. Pinker's face was a caricature of lunacy and evil, the face of the devil himself, striped black and white, grinning, malevolent.

Jonathan tried to work another antenna free. Pinker snapped forward and swept Jonathan's legs from the roof, sending him hard on his back. Then Pinker was on his knees, the knife bright and terrible in his tattooed fist as he raised it.

The door Pinker had tried so desperately to batter down suddenly swung open, spilling light across the rooftop. There were Don, and Rhino, and six cops, all with their pistols out. Pinker hesitated, his head turning sideways, the knife still firmly in his fist.

"Drop it," Don shouted. *"I mean it, goddammit!"*

Pinker wobbled to his feet. An idiotic smile spread across his face. The knife fell from his hand. He looked down to Jonathan, leering. "She died real hard, y'know. Your girlfriend, that is. Know what I mean?"

Jonathan lunged upward with his left hand groping for the fallen knife, finding it in an instant, ready to slash the slasher to a thousand pieces. Don and another officer scrambled over and fell on him, pinning his left arm behind his back, holding him away. Jonathan squirmed and kicked. "Go to hell, Pinker," he shouted. "I'll see you dead, you bastard!"

Two officers raced over and snapped handcuffs on Pinker's wrists. Still he grinned that hateful, malicious grin. "You like killing too," he said. "It's in the blood, for you and for me. Killers, pure and simple. You and me."

Jonathan struggled against the arms that held him tight, wanting to reach Pinker's throat and mash it shut forever. "I want you dead!" he screamed. "I want to see you die!"

Pinker cast him a wicked smile as he was dragged away. The rest of the police brigade followed, pistols out and ready. Jonathan watched as Pinker disappeared into the light.

"In control now?" Don asked.

Jonathan let himself go limp. He nodded. "I'm alright. No more shit, I promise it."

They let him go. Don came around, his face set and grave in the shadowy light. "If you want him dead, the state will take care of that. He'll fry for sure. He's history."

Jonathan grunted. "Sure. He'll probably get five to ten behind bars. Five or six years, he'll be out on parole."

Don wagged his head. "Not this guy. They'll cook him to death in

the chair.”

Jonathan nodded. “Fine, then. But I want to be there.”

“What?”

“I said I want to be there. To watch him fry. I’ve earned it. I want to watch him die.”

Don studied him. “You’re not kidding.” He ran a hand over his hair. “Maybe I’m like you. Maybe we’ve both earned box seats at the execution.”

“Can you arrange it?”

Don smiled bitterly. “I can guarantee it.”

And he was right. It took time, though. And it was only the beginning.

Chapter • Six

The days drifted past and Alison was still dead. The days became months, and still Alison was dead. Jonathan ached for her, lying alone on his bed while snow piled up outside, sitting alone blankly staring at some idiocy on television while Alison rotted underground in the quiet of a wet new spring. Spring became summer. Pinker finally went on trial with Jonathan as the star witness. It took the jury eleven minutes to pronounce him guilty on nearly fifty counts of murder; two weeks later the judge had made up his mind about the case. He sentenced Pinker to roast in the electric chair at the state prison. Pinker's state-appointed attorney did not file an appeal. He told reporters he wanted Pinker very dead and deposited in the burning hell he deserved.

It was a wet and windy Tuesday when Jonathan stood with Pac-Man, Rhino, and Coach Cooper at the entrance to the prison. Don Parker had made good on his word: both he and Jonathan were to be admitted into the viewing room. This would be a brief affair: two thousand volts of electricity for one-half minute, a check by a state-appointed physician to see if Pinker's heart was still ticking, and if so, another blast of joy-juice guaranteed to bring his brain temperature up past 350 degrees and cook him from the inside out.

Jonathan's shoulders were hunched, his hands deep inside his pockets, because of the wind and its cold promise of rain. The joy he might have felt at this moment a year ago was no longer there; nothing would bring Alison back. Even his own desire for revenge was muted. Too much time had passed, and Pinker was as good as dead already.

Pac-Man let out a huge sigh. He was staring through the heavy fence at the prison up ahead, a depressing structure of steel and stone. He looked over to Jonathan. "Are you okay, man?"

"Just fine," Jonathan said coldly.

Cooper put a hand on his shoulder. "We'll be right here if you need us."

"Sure," Rhino said. "If there's any problem, I'll come in and personally break his neck." He laughed, but it came out sounding weak and unconvincing. He put a fist over his mouth and faked a cough.

Don Parker walked over from the prison's tiny employee parking

lot, and together he and Jonathan were admitted onto the prison grounds. They walked in silence, heads bowed. Low clouds swirled overhead, as dark as the prison's cement walls, and weak thunder made noises in the east. Jonathan was gritting his teeth without knowing why. This was the day he had lived for, but now it seemed like just another irritation.

They went in. Jonathan went up steps and through a maze of corridors, following Don now. He looked around and saw blank walls and barred doors. The place echoed with the hum of indecipherable conversations and jail doors clanking; somewhere someone was screaming and laughing. Don't let it be Pinker, Jonathan thought. I don't ever want to hear that voice again.

They stopped at a blank steel door. Don pushed a button on a squawk box set in the wall, and waited. A few moments later a tinny voice crackled out of the speaker. "Yeah?"

"Police Detective Donald Parker, and Jonathan Parker."

"Going to watch Pinker sizzle?"

"Just open, please."

A snort of displeasure came, followed by the buzzing of the door's electronic latch. Don pushed, and they were in another corridor. The guard ignored them. Jonathan could feel the emptiness of this huge place, aware that it smelled strangely like a combination of fresh paint and sweat. Things clanked and rattled endlessly. He looked around, feeling queasy. How could anyone survive in a place like this?

They came to another door, the last one on this endless parade. It was simply made of old wood with a wire-mesh window set inside. Jonathan followed Don in, glancing around.

The first thing that came to him was the enormity of the electric chair. It was perched in a small room of its own, a Frankenstein construction full of wires and coils and leather straps. Behind the glass wall it seemed to be grinning, a machine that fed on fear and death. Jonathan shivered without meaning to. This was the end of the line, the last act in a tragedy that had no plot and made no sense.

He willed his eyes away from the huge chair and looked around. A stethoscope was dangling from a brass hook near the chair. On the south wall was a large clock, steadily counting out the minutes Pinker had left to live. There was a black telephone set in the wall beside it, a telephone with no dial. Ominous. How many prisoners over the years had sat here hoping that phone would ring, that the governor might soften up and save their criminal hides before the final moment came? Jonathan shrugged to himself. Probably a few dozen.

In the viewing chamber itself were a dozen straight-backed wooden chairs that looked as if they had been here for fifty years. Already

most of the witnesses were sitting in them, reporters and the select few who got a chance to watch a man fry. They all looked somehow eager yet strained, as if hesitant to gawk at a man going up in smoke, but wanting—*needing*—to witness it.

Jonathan and Don took chairs near the front. Jonathan wondered briefly if he would have the displeasure of smelling Pinker as he baked in his two-thousand-volt private oven. He hoped not. Pinker smelled bad enough as it was. Jonathan turned nervously to Don.

"Where is he?"

Don gave him a grim smile. "Choking on his last meal, I hope." He glanced at his watch. "They should be going for him right now."

Jonathan nodded. The man was an animal, one that was about to be very dead at last. He was quite sure of that.

But he was wrong …

… and so was the priest, who assumed that in all humans there is a bit of decency, and that a man on death row can have his soul easily saved by the act of remorse and repentance. This was the reason that he gave last rites to the doomed prisoners here, prisoners who at the last moment often begged God to forgive them, for they knew not what they did.

Horace Pinker, on the other hand, knew quite well what he did. The good father, Michael Vanatti by name, approached his cell on death row with a Bible in one hand and a string of rosary beads in the other. If the truth be known, he rather enjoyed execution day, for no man is more prone to conversion than a man about to meet his Maker. It beat hounding the winos who staggered into the church and asked for a buck for a bottle of Ripple, because the man least prone to conversion is a man who is well into his cups and not particularly able to care about anything. So on this afternoon, fifteen minutes before Pinker was to die, Father Vanatti strode purposefully to Horace Pinker's cell, fully expecting to wreak a miracle.

"Coming, my son," he spoke aloud to the bars. "It's time to—"

He sucked in a breath, hard enough to cool off his front teeth. Pinker was already busy with a conversion of his own. He sat cross-legged behind a circle of burning black candles he had somehow smuggled in, wearing the standard death row clothing, Day-Glo orange overalls with a black and white checkered band running horizontally around his chest and back. In the center of the circle of candles was an upside-down cross, propped on its head. In the eerie darkness behind the bars Pinker was visible as a black shadow shrouded in flickering candlelight, his face glowing in shades of orange and yellow. On the wall beside him, bolted to the cinder block,

was a standard prison television. Its casing had been torn apart to expose the tangle of its innards. Its face showed nothing but a hash of electronic snow.

Father Vanatti stumbled backward, his eyes wide with surprise. He noticed with horror that Pinker was jerking and pulsating, and that a set of automobile jumper cables led from the TV to his hands. Sparks popped where the clamps were anchored, bouncing to the floor and sizzling there. Pinker was grinning as he did a sit-down version of the boogie-woogie.

Something black belched out of the TV, something thick as smoke. It swirled around Pinker's head, a noxious steam that the father thought could only come from the bowels of hell itself. Its smell was a combination of burnt electrical wiring and burning hair. He fell back with a cry.

The candles all blew out.

He managed to motion to a guard, then averted his eyes from this scene of utter blasphemy. His Bible suddenly felt hot in his hand, the rosary beads tiny burning coals. He threw them down the corridor and wiped his hands on his frock, his face drawn up with disgust. They felt greasy and somehow numb. The Bible skittered on the cement and impacted against a wall. It burst into flames. The rosary beads popped like small firecrackers.

A guard rushed over while Father Vanatti crossed himself over and over. The guard jammed a large key into the cell's lock, trying furiously to turn it.

Pinker leaned over and grabbed the bars with both hands. The guard working the key let out a shriek and dropped to the floor while the bars spat sparks in a shower. The guard's hands were blistered and smoking. He began to scream.

Vanatti opened his eyes. Pinker had resumed his lotus position, his face peaceful, almost sleepy. Foamy saliva dribbled down his chin and spattered on his absurd orange overalls. As Father Vanatti looked on with renewed terror, blue sparks buzzed and swirled around Pinker's drool. Then his lips drew up in a hideous grin.

"Yessss," he whispered, sounding to the father the way the snake in Eden must have sounded as he talked Eve into serving an apple with lunch. "Let me have it," he hissed, then loudened his voice to a shout. *"Let me have it!"*

He got it. The dark cloud that boiled around his head changed shape, coalescing into a huge and barely visible face. Vanatti saw glowing red eyes the size of footballs swarming in the mist, the twisted suggestion of a mouth, perhaps horns, perhaps not. He could no longer trust his own eyes as he stared, speechless with wonder, at

the creature that surrounded Pinker. The mouth-shape drew up in a leering smile, much as Pinker had so often smiled. Then the ghastly red lips opened.

“You got it, baby,” it said in a voice that made the father nearly swoon, a voice that had to be from the hottest and darkest reaches of hell, the twisted, booming voice of Satan himself.

The face, if it had been there, vanished. The swirling vapor was sucked back into the television. It blew apart like a bombshell, gushing sparks and flame. Pinker arched his back in a spasm as new and hotter electricity surged into his hands. His bulging eyes seemed to glow with a terrible energy too powerful for the father to imagine.

Then he slumped over as if beaned by a falling anvil. His head bounced on the floor.

“Jesus H. Christ,” the good father moaned. “What in heaven …”

Another guard rushed over with a towel. He touched the bars with a quick flick of a finger, nodded to the priest, and snapped a key from the large key ring hooked to his belt. He stuck it in the lock. His partner had decided to quit screaming, and got woozily to his feet. “Whuzza?” he asked, staring at his hands. “Whuzza-what happened?”

The other guard went into the cell and slung the towel around Pinker’s neck. “I don’t whuzza any more than you do. All I saw was weird smoke blowing around. Then the TV went.”

“Drag his ass outta there. His brain’s been fried. I’ll go round up a stretcher as soon as I get back from the infirmary. Leave his stupid corpse on the floor.”

The other frowned. “What about the execution? We’re running late already, and you know how the warden is.”

His partner nodded, blowing on his burned hands. “I guess we gotta put some life back into him so he can die again. Give him mouth-to-mouth or something.”

All he got was a disgusted look. *“You* give this animal a blowjob. I ain’t touching him.”

“Alright, alright.” He bent down, swallowed at the greasy taste that had crawled into his mouth, pinched Pinker’s nostrils shut, and gave it a shot. When Pinker was full he drew back and let him exhale. The guard, one John Tarkins if you could trust his nametag, wrinkled his nose. “Jeez if this animal don’t *stink*. Smells like a skunk crawled up his ass and died. You take over.”

“No way, José. You be the hero.”

Growling, the guard named John Tarkins fastened his mouth over Pinker’s once again, and Pinker struck quick as a cobra, sinking his teeth fully shut on John Tarkins’s lower lip. Tarkins let out a whoop of

pain and surprise, trying to pull back, feeling his lower lip stretch, aware of the stagnant-water taste of blood in his mouth, needing to pull free but unable, and God oh God, did it *hurt!* He bellowed for help, staring into the red cesspools of Pinker's eyes. He was smiling with a mouthful of lip.

John's partner fell on his knees and began fumbling with Pinker's mouth, trying to pull his jaw down, scrabbling at his eyes, all the while screaming at no one to give him a hand. Father Vanatti wasn't able; he was busy demolishing the horrid tabernacle Pinker had set up, fuming and cursing in a decidedly unpriestly way. Tarkins barked and howled while tears of pain slid down his cheeks.

"Let him go, you creep," the other guard growled. Pinker responded quickly. He let go of Tarkins's lip and crunched his teeth down on two of the fingers that had tried so hard to set Tarkins free. He got a quick response:

"Nooooooo!"

Bones crunched. Pinker worked his jaw back and forth, grinding his teeth. The guard pulled his hand free with a jerk, and then blood was jetting all over the floor, splashing on Pinker. The guard stared at his new hand with amazement.

Pinker spit the fingers out, then smiled. "Finger-lickin' good!" His voice was low and rumbling, hinting at hidden powers and an inconceivably destructive force.

By now four more guards had heard the commotion and came running. Tarkins and his pal ran down to the infirmary. Pinker was hauled upright.

"Howya doon?" he said casually. "Time to get on with the killing?"

They hauled him away, beating and kicking him in a frenzy.

He seemed to enjoy it.

Chapter • Seven

Jonathan was sitting in the viewing room with a fist pressed to his mouth, remembering Alison, conjuring up mental images of her face when she was alive and happy. He realized with a start that he didn't even have a picture of her; perhaps it was okay, because he could see her clearly on the inner screen of his mind, as clearly as he had seen her that day in the bleachers, the day he had kissed the goalpost.

He was aware that Don had craned around in his seat. A door banged, loudly enough to make everyone jump. Pinker was hauled in by two guards, looking ferociously insane and absolutely ridiculous in the orange overalls. Another guard was in front, another behind. Tagging along was a priest who looked pale and sick.

Pinker was hauled past Jonathan. Grinning like a clown, he tried to jerk away from the guards who held his elbows. His eyes locked with Jonathan's.

"Come to look death in the face, schoolboy?"

The guards pushed him forward to the door and heaved him roughly into the chamber. He caught his balance and walked serenely to the chair, his dead foot dragging. He plopped himself down on the grotesque killing machine like a man about to get a leisurely shave and a haircut. Two guards produced knives and went to work slitting his overalls at the ankles, peeling them upward to make room for the straps. Pinker didn't seem to mind at all. His eyes still held Jonathan's, and his grin hung on.

The priest stepped into the chamber and cleared his throat. "Would you like to pray with me, my … son?"

Pinker leered at him. "Go pray with your choirboys, you faggot. I got other things on my mind."

The priest, whose name Jonathan would never know, backed out with an audible sigh of relief. He left the viewing room and quietly clicked the door shut.

The straps were pulled tight. A bizarre copper beanie, looking for all the world like an upside-down cereal bowl, was pulled down tight over Pinker's head. A leather chin strap was cinched tight. He looked at Jonathan again, studying him as if he had known him all of Jonathan's life. Jonathan squirmed uncomfortably, trying to fathom the meaning behind those savage eyes.

The guards checked him again, then backed out of the cell. The door slammed shut. Pinker giggled.

The viewing room door snapped open again, and this time a man in an ordinary suit strode to the front. He turned his back to Pinker. “Ladies and gentlemen, as warden of this facility I am directed by the state to ask you all to bear witness to this execution. In most cases this is a duty I would rather was not mine. But today, I feel justice is being served.”

He looked around, adjusting his tie. There was a light sheen of sweat on his forehead. “Is the state medical officer present?”

The woman to Jonathan’s right spoke up. “I am, Warden. But I must insist that this procedure is against all the laws of man and nature. We’re treating this man as if he were some sort of animal.”

Don leaned over to Jonathan, whispering. “Why give animals such a bum rap?” He chuckled, enjoying his joke. Jonathan couldn’t even look at him. Something about Pinker’s eyes, or his face. Something …

“The state makes the rules, Doctor. If you can’t stomach this, find yourself a new job.”

The woman stared at him, tried to speak, then sat down. She adjusted her clothes with prim little motions of indignation.

The warden glanced at the clock. It was motoring along toward the hour. He stepped sideways and addressed himself to Pinker. “Does the prisoner have any final words?”

Pinker continued to stare at Jonathan. “Not for you, asswipe. It’s the boy I wanna talk to.”

The warden spread his hands. “The prisoner is allowed to speak his piece. Go ahead.”

Pinker grinned even wider. “Your pitiful little memory has wiped it all out, hasn’t it? I used to beat you real good, sonny. I was beating you good when your momma tried to stop me with a gun—”

Don Parker had jumped to his feet. “Shut up,” he shouted. “You hear me?”

Pinker ignored him. “I was beating you good when your momma tried to stop me with that gun she snuck into our happy home. You watched me kill her—remember how she screamed? A pig in a slaughterhouse, that’s what she sounded like when I—”

“You stop it!” Don screamed. “Shut your lying mouth!”

The warden intervened. “Lieutenant, the man has a right to say his last words. It’s the law and we have to obey it. Sit down.”

Don seemed to be about to lunge forward. He hesitated, wavering. Then he slumped into his chair.

The warden made a go-ahead motion. Pinker nodded under his

dunce cap. “You were pretty clever, sonny. You grabbed that gun and shot me through the knee, little peckerhead with that big gun, blasting away at your daddy with murder in your eyes. Like father, like son.”

Jonathan felt his lungs trying to lock up and deprive him of air in a room that had become incredibly stuffy. Pinker’s presence was overpowering, his pale face under its cap seeming as big as the moon. Jonathan wondered dimly if everyone here was being affected as he was. Surely it couldn’t be, but he was barely able to breathe, unable to take his eyes off this monstrosity in orange. Sweat broke out on his hairline.

Incredibly, Pinker puckered his lips and blew an obscene kiss in Jonathan’s direction. Then he turned to the warden. “What are you waiting for, shithead? *Do* it to me!”

The warden took a faltering backward step. Sweat was running openly down his face now. He looked over to the guard who was waiting at the switch to pull the plug on Pinker forever. He gave him a nod. “You heard the man,” he croaked. “Do it.”

He did. Something buzzed loudly. Pinker convulsed in his chair with a disgusting, piglike grunt. Sparks popped and flew. Pinker strained against the straps with his eyes rolling up in his head. A blast of smoke shot out from under the copper cap, yet still he grinned, and grinned, beaming with some wild brand of insane ecstasy.

The lights went out.

Jonathan felt Don hop to his feet. Someone shouted. Someone—the doctor, Jonathan thought—jumped up and stomped on his foot.

The lights struggled back on, glowing from orange to full power. Pinker had slumped back into the electric chair, no longer straining. His eyes rolled down and focused on Jonathan while puffs of smoke chugged out of the upside-down cereal bowl. His grin seemed to be tattooed to his face forever.

The doctor gasped, still standing on Jonathan’s foot. “Oh my God,” she whispered. “Oh my dear God.”

The warden followed her eyes to the chair. He jerked back. “Check him out, lady! *Now!”*

She ran for the chamber door, hurled it open, and reached out to touch Pinker’s neck. Jonathan rose up, too stunned to think, knowing only that Pinker was righting himself in the chair while smoke puffed out of his leering mouth. His eyes had closed down to mindless black slots.

The doctor touched him. There was a bright explosion of blue sparks between them. She screamed and was blown backward, but before Jonathan could react the lights snapped off again and darkness

settled over the viewing room. For a moment there was only the acid hum of electricity pulsing through unseen power lines. A woman screamed, but surely not the doctor, Jonathan thought, because of the fact that she was currently dead, roasted alive by a nightmare named Pinker.

The lights tried to stutter back on. Again something distant and unseen buzzed, like angry hornets. Jonathan fumbled through the dark, thudding into people, grabbing handfuls of clothing, knocking over chairs. The lights sputtered their way back on, this time for good. Jonathan spun around.

Pinker was gone. The medieval monstrosity that was the electric chair stood empty, the thick leather straps burned and smoking, the wood itself, wood that had been cut and carved so many years ago, now charred and ruined.

Jonathan swung back around. The guard who had stood at the entrance door was facedown on the floor, his dead eyes open and glassy as he stared at the legs of chairs and the dustballs that had accumulated there. The simple wooden door was open, the wire-mesh glass cracked in a spiderwork mosaic. Jonathan shoved his way to the door and flung it open. The glass fell out in a sheet and shattered on the cement floor with a noise like a hundred light bulbs exploding. Jonathan took a step, his eyes wide and searching. No Pinker.

No Pinker!

The warden shouted at his guards. “I want the whole goddam cellblock sealed until we find him! He won’t get far after taking a hit like that!”

Bullshit, Jonathan thought as his spirit sunk into his shoes. Just watch him, watch that man Pinker go.

The guards hustled past him, followed by Don Parker. He drew up beside Jonathan, breathing hard. “Forget what he said, Jon. The ravings of a madman.”

“Yeah?” Jonathan gave him a sour and defeated look. “Tell me it isn’t true, then. A lie, all that crap about me when I was seven.”

“Ignore it. It’s been in the news that you were a foster child. Pinker was just messing with your mind. Let’s go help find the bastard.”

He started away, glanced back, and saw that Jonathan was staring off to nowhere, his face ashen and grave.

“Come on, Jon.” He touched his arm. “Still with me?”

Jonathan sniffed, his nostrils widening slightly. “Pinker,” he whispered.

“Of course Pinker. Come on.”

“Electricity …”

Don eyed him.

“Over there,” Jonathan said, his voice faint and squeaky. He lifted one limp hand as if controlled by hidden wires. “That room …”

Don whirled, following his dangling finger. A door, set into the concrete to the right, was slightly open and stamped with a skull and crossbones that warned whoever might enter there that they must cross the threshold at their own risk. Smoke was curling out of the gap at the bottom. Things were snapping and popping behind it, filling the air with the stench of burned connections, fried insulators, and … something else.

Don hauled the door fully open, burning his hand on the doorknob. The opening part wasn’t hard; it was what came next that would sear itself into his brain and intrude for the rest of his life in daydreams and nightmares. Lazy flames were beginning to crackle as he looked inside and saw the gadgetry that fed two thousand volts to the chair. A spark blew out, sizzling past his ear. Horace Pinker was inside too, looking a bit slumped and worn out in the weirdly sparkling light. Burn lines had etched themselves into a ring around his forehead. Smoke still drifted off him, but it was dying smoke. Don reached to haul him out.

Pinker beat him to it. He fell face-first out of the tiny room and thudded lightly on the floor. Jonathan stepped over, still acting stunned and woozy, and prodded Pinker’s head with a foot.

Pinker fell apart like the fat ash from a cigar. Only his Day-Glo orange overalls remained intact, looking mildly cooked, the load of Pinker-ash still inside but rapidly deflating.

Don stared at the disintegrating husk. “Jesus,” he said. “That chair really kicks ass.”

Two guards hurried past with the doctor propped between them. She was moaning and thrashing while white smoke poured out of her hair.

“Where’s she off to?” Don barked.

They stopped, and one guard looked back. “Infirmary. She’s flipping out. Electrocution.”

Don shook his head. “The infirmary here is worse than a Civil War amputation tent. Head downtown with her. Hospital. Get me?”

The other guard looked back, seemed about to make a remark, then hoisted the doctor higher and dragged her down the corridor with his partner hurrying to keep pace.

“Idiots,” Don mumbled.

Jonathan shook his head to clear it. He wrinkled his nose. “Jesus, I’ve got to get some air. How do we get out of here?”

“Same way we got in, I guess,” Don said, and led the way out.

The idiot guards Don Parker had barked at went by the name of Chadwick and Jones, two ordinary middle-aged working types who mildly hated their jobs but had to have them in order to support their various needs. For example, Chadwick needed beer the way most people need oxygen. Jones, no slouch with the bottle, liked to take a toke now and then on his pocket bong, a habit he had acquired while still a teenager. The difference between day and night slid past them as easily as sand through an hourglass, because the party just never stopped, not for Chadwick and Jones it didn’t. Both were divorced. Both had nasty child-support payments to make every month. Both sported beer bellies the size of a middle-aged watermelon. Both were extremely upset that they had to drive this doctor bitch to the hospital, because at four o’clock every Tuesday the gang leader of cellblock six put in his weekly order, which Jones and Chadwick eagerly supplied. Cocaine was going for eighty-five on the street; in the joint the cons managed to dredge up a hundred ten. Lots of ounces, lots of cash. But this week might as well have been spent in a dumpster, because with no one there to take the order, nothing happened. And the cons could get mean if they put their minds to it.

“Damn,” Chadwick groaned after they had tossed the smoky-headed brain-damaged bitch across the back seat and taken their places on the front seat. This was an official state prison car, a green affair with blackwall tires and white stenciling on the doors that warned passersby to keep away from all this official business. They drove this highly official car to the gate and Chadwick laid on the horn. Pretty soon the gate swung open as if pulled by ghosts, and they headed out toward Maryville, quite a drive even for a sober man.

Jones dug behind his jacket to his shirt pocket, where a very large chrome flask of Everclear 190-proof distilled spirits permanently resided. It tasted like turpentine. It was as warm as bathwater. There was a warning on the label that said it was highly flammable; Jones believed this with all his heart, for taking a swig of this poison was like swallowing razor blades. But it did the trick, made the days and nights fly by a little faster and a little more bearably, so he drank it. Plus it was economical: one Jones-size flask of the stuff equaled two bottles of regular hooch.

He handed it over to Chadwick, who was driving while straining slightly to see the road through a cold and miserable drizzle falling outside. The wipers thumped out a steady backbeat. “Ain’t this just shit?” he moaned, then took a drink. His ears became instantly red and his eyes began to water. He coughed once, took a breath, and

handed the bottle back. “Christ, that shit’s gonna kill you one day.” He took a hand off the wheel and fanned his mouth. “Damn goat piss.”

“So don’t drink it then,” Jones snarled, sticking it back in his shirt. For a brief moment he felt like apologizing, then forgot about it. The day was screwed, the week’s extra cash was screwed, and the boys of cellblock six would be highly steamed. A man had a right to be irritated by such a screwup.

“I got it,” Chadwick blurted, snapping his fingers. “We’ll just dump the bitch in a ditch. Hey, now I’m a poet. Bitch in ditch.” He chuckled miserably. “Anyhow, we’ll shitcan the lady and buzz back in time to take orders. Nobody will give a shit, and the doctor lady’s as good as dead. Maybe she already is after taking a blast like that. Take her pulse or something.”

Jones shrugged and reached behind the seat, scrabbling around for a wrist or a neck to feel. His fingers found only warm vinyl.

“Where’d she go?” he said, and turned around to look.

She was there, alright. Only now she was slightly different. She was sitting up. Her hair stood out in wild tangles, hairy spokes that framed a face gone gray as ash. Her eyes were bulging. She grinned at Jones.

“What’s up, Doc?” she said in a deep baritone voice.

“What the shit?” Jones squeaked. As far as last words go, these seemed as good as any. She lunged with a terrifying shriek and clamped her hands around his head, wrenching it around. Jones grimaced in agony. There was a large wet snap, and he died as he had lived, not knowing what was going on.

Chadwick shrank away, his eyes bright and wild. “What the hell are you doing?” he bellowed.

The doctor looked at him with insane red eyes. “Just feel like a little head, sport!”

She gave another twist and Jones’s head tore away. She tossed it to the floor. Blood gushed up in a crimson fountain, splashing on the roof, drenching the seats. Chadwick got a faceful of it. He scrubbed at his eyes as the doctor clambered over the seat. “Come here, good-looking,” she said sweetly. “Let’s try you on for size.”

Chadwick screamed as she grabbed him. The car swerved all over the wet road, sliding almost sideways, the tires spouting steam. He felt her hands trying to dig into his eyes.

“Noooooo!” he roared. Above the noise of his own scream he could distantly hear the blast of an air horn, which meant semi, which meant semi coming, which meant somebody was about to get flattened by a semi.

He was right, but not totally. The semi was a tanker truck hauling

lead-free gasoline, full to the brim, ready to explode at the slightest spark.

Chadwick pumped the brakes in a frenzy. His hand groped for the door handle. It clicked open, and then there was wind in his face, rain in his eyes.

When the green official-business car and the tanker collided, there were plenty of sparks. And as observers would later say, it looked and sounded like an atomic bomb.

Chapter • Eight

One of the observers was named Jonathan Parker. He and Don had been detained briefly by the warden, to sign witness papers as proof that they had been there. They engaged in chitchat with the warden, who agreed that this was the strangest execution he'd ever seen. But Pinker was dead, burned, gone. Don and the warden agreed on that. They shook hands and congratulated each other.

Jonathan remained silent.

As the two crossed to the prison gate, where Coach Cooper, Pac-Man, and Rhino stood waiting in the rain, Jonathan saw a huge orange fireball reaching toward the sky, sucking a black pall of smoke after it. A second later a wave of noise and concussion made his clothes flap against his skin, almost made him cover his ears. He and Don stopped, watching with amazement as the mushroom cloud blossomed like an ugly orange flower against the dim backdrop of sky.

"Holy cow," Don breathed, and sprinted back to the prison, shouting something about the fire department and a phone. Jonathan jogged over to the gate and waited for it to open.

Pac-Man was gaping at the fire with his mouth hanging open. "What the hell happened? World War Three?"

The coach shook his head. "Why would the Russians bomb Maryville? There's nothing here but people."

Rhino shrugged. "Why did we bomb Dresden?"

"It's no bomb," Jonathan said gravely. "I guarantee you that."

Don came back, looking ashen. "Fire department's on the way. They're contacting other stations for backup. From here this looks like the biggest disaster since the Chicago fire. Let's check it out." He rattled the gate. "Come on, dammit. Open up."

The electric latch sprang open. Don and Jonathan hurried through the gate while the other three ran for the coach's big Dodge van. Motors came alive, and then they were racing toward the west, following the flaming beacon.

It took only ten minutes. Don stopped a hundred yards away, but still the heat was a broiling furnace when they stepped out. Jonathan shielded his eyes, unable to look at the yellow heart of the fire. What he did see were the blackened, bubbling shapes of a car and a huge truck, and then he had to turn away.

“Jesus,” Don muttered, also turning. “Talk about a *wreck.”*

Another section of the tanker blew apart, rocketing flames toward the low, soggy sky. Bits of shrapnel whizzed past Jonathan, making him duck. A black and misshapen car door zinged overhead like a giant Frisbee, spinning crazily, and wrapped itself around a tree. Steam boiled off of it.

“In the car,” Don said. “We’re getting the hell out of this inferno.” He tugged on Jonathan’s arm, opening the door.

Jonathan jerked away. The smoking car door had something stenciled on its side, something now cooked and almost illegible. He walked toward it, straining to see, blinking away the rain in his eyes.

He could make out a few words:

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A wave of fear washed through his veins like ice water. State prison car, that’s what this had been. And …

“Don?” he shouted, turning back. More burning junk fell around him, clanging on the highway. A flaming tire fell out of nowhere and bounced across a field to the right, wobbling, belching smoke. It fell over and tiddly-winked a remarkably long time, trying to ignite the weeds and grass. The rain killed that idea. Jonathan looked away from it, imagining for a moment that this must be what a real war was like. It was not a good vision.

He reached the car and Don threw him inside. Don hurried around the back and dived into the driver’s seat, sweating, cursing.

“What did you think you were doing? Watching a circus?”

Jonathan ignored the questions. “That was a prison car,” he said as Don started the car and slammed it into reverse. The rear tires hissed on the wet road, bouncing the car as it tried to get moving. “Prison car,” Jonathan said again. “Was the doctor in it?”

Now Don ignored him. “Where the hell are those frigging fire trucks?”

“Was the doctor lady in it? Was she?”

Don backed to where the road was clear of debris, near Coach Cooper’s big van. He turned to Jonathan, his face tight with irritation. “Of course she was in there. I sent those two guards to take her to town.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. Look, Jon, if you’ve got an asbestos ass, go look for yourself. Otherwise keep quiet.” He got a cigarette out of a pocket

and lit it up. “Why are you so interested in the doctor, anyway? Pinker’s dead. So is she, and those two other bozos. Go home with the other guys—I have to stay here. Go get drunk or something. Forget about everything. Pinker’s dead as dog meat and that’s all that matters.”

Jonathan tried to put on a smile, but managed only to grimace. “That’s just it,” he said softly. “I don’t think he *is* dead.”

Don made some kind of noise of disbelief that sounded much like a loud fart. He shut the motor off, then turned back to Jonathan. “You’re getting close to being certifiable at the county funny farm, you know. What’s this all about?”

Jonathan made useless motions in the air. “I … I didn’t feel anything from Pinker’s body when he fell out of that closet thing. It was just a dead husk. What I mean is, it was like it wasn’t Pinker anymore. Just a shell.”

“Brilliant observation,” Don grunted. “It wasn’t Pinker, just fried meat. Good riddance. It’s just too bad he took so many with him.”

Jonathan lapsed into silence, knowing it was useless to try to explain. He didn’t fully understand it himself.

“Go on home,” Don said a minute later. “Get some rest or something.”

Jonathan got out, demoralized. Was he cracking up? Victim to some new kind of paranoia? He felt like thumping his head against the car’s roof for a while. At least a fractured skull would give him something solid to worry about.

The deep basso blast of a fire truck’s horn made him stop with one foot in the car, the other on the pavement. Don jumped out as the truck roared past them and stopped incredibly close to the fire. Men came out and began pulling white hoses out of the bowels of the truck. Water shot skyward. An ambulance zoomed past the car, all lights flashing.

You’re wasting your time, Jonathan thought. *Whatever was in there is dead.* To this he added two more words: *I hope.*

The back of the ambulance flew open and two men in white suits charged out. For reasons Jonathan could not understand, they began scouting the weedy ditches that lined the road. He assumed it was some kind of formality; since the occupants of both vehicles were obviously toasting, why not check the roadside for bodies? Theoretically it was possible that someone had been ejected during the crash, so instead of burning with his buddies this someone had to be satisfied with drowning to death in a ditch. Why not? You can’t always punch your own ticket on that grim march toward eternity.

One of the ambulance people shouted, but Jonathan didn't catch it. He saw one of the men in white race to the ambulance with its big red cross on the side, and haul a stretcher out. The collapsible legs dropped open with a bang. The man scurried back to where the other was standing. They hauled something, some dark thing, out of the mucky water and eased it onto the stretcher.

Someone shouted at Jonathan. He turned back, frowning at this sudden change in the plot of the no-survivors routine. What the hell had they put on that stretcher, and why were they racing toward the open ambulance with it?

The shouter was Pac-Man, leaning out of a window in the coach's van. "Get over here!" he was bellowing. "There's nothing we can do!"

Jonathan turned back as if he hadn't heard. Who could have survived this catastrophe? The lady doctor? And if someone survived, couldn't they have …

… have what? Scooped up Pinker's ghost? Become some kind of Pinker-Zombie? Take a reality break and get your ass home …

Well, someone *could* have been thrown out. Right?

Jonathan nodded. Too much weird shit had been happening for too long. Just one little task, and then back to normal life.

He jogged to the ambulance. Don was there, leaning over that dark thing on the stretcher. He saw Jonathan and turned abruptly. "I told you to go home!" He mashed a hand to Jonathan's chest. "Beat it!"

"Who is that?" Jonathan asked, none too calmly.

"One of the prison guards. Nothing more. Go away."

Jonathan shook his head in a blur. "Ask him what happened to the lady doctor—go on, *ask* him! He knows something. I can feel it."

The stretcher's legs refolded noisily as the stretcher was shoved into the guts of the ambulance. The guard was moaning and twisting his head back and forth. Light winked off his battered nametag: CHADWICK.

Jonathan tried to climb in, shoving Don and the ambulance man aside. He had to look, had to see, had to know if this man had the answers to questions that were too bizarre to ask. Seen Pinker around? Did the doc wake up with red eyes? Are you by chance possessed by a demon? No problem, just asking. Have a nice time at the hospital.

Don Parker reached up and caught Jonathan by the back of his shirt. His shoes squeaked on the wet chrome of the bumper, and then he was falling back. He nearly went down hard on his butt. Feet slapped wet asphalt around him, and there were Rhino and Pac-Man and the coach, looking at him as if he had come unwired and blown a fuse.

"Get him out of here," Don said, breathing hard. "Put his ass in bed

and keep it there."

They hoisted him up. Jonathan struggled to get his arms free. No use. "I need to look in his eyes!" he shouted, realizing somewhere deep inside that he was becoming a maniac and desperately needed sedation. "Just one look," he pleaded. "One in the eyes."

"Take him," Don said, and they did, dragging him as gently as possible while he kicked and screamed, Jonathan knowing in that same inner place that he had lost it, given in to paranoia and lunacy, and was, as Don had said, quite certifiable.

His friends opened the van and shoved him inside, making apologies but doing it anyway. The skies opened and rain fell in a solid sheet, rattling on the roof and making headlights sparkle on the street.

They took him home to the aching emptiness that was his apartment.

He sat on his Barcalounger, vibrating while his back was massaged up and down, unaware of the time, knowing only that on his television some boring program was showing, some nameless late-night show, its shifting images dancing on the walls like blue fluorescence. His hands were laced behind his head and he was frowning, as if he were deep in thought. The opposite was true: he had emptied his mind of everything. He was, as they used to say in the old hippie days, spacing out. No drugs in his veins, though: fatigue and the relentless onset of insanity had drained him. All he wanted to do now was fall asleep and never ever wake up.

He clicked the chair off, forcing his eyes to close. It didn't work. As soon as he began to drift away his eyes snapped open, as if jerked that way by pesky inner springs. He dived onto the bed and mashed his face into the pillow, keeping his eyes shut, demanding that his empty brain shut off for the night. He did not think of Pinker and he did not think of Alison and he did not think of the botched execution he had seen today. He only thought of sleep.

And it began to come, gradually. The springs that ran his eyelids shut down for the night; the tautness in his shoulders began to relax. He entered that mysterious zone between waking and sleeping, aware still of the television and its sound, aware also that he was entering a dream in which shadows bobbed and whirled, sometimes taking shape and then dissolving, making no sense but beckoning to him just the same.

Water started dripping somewhere …

… *tap tap tap* …

… drawing him slowly out of this alluring dream where violence did not exist and no seven-year-old boys were beaten and abandoned by a hideous father with a bullet hole in his knee …

… *tap tap tap* …

… and where shadows spoke only gibberish but beckoned all the same.

He lifted his head off of the pillow, frowning again. The dream slammed shut on him like a noisy metal door. Frigging water faucet. Tap tap tap. Son of a bitch.

He swung himself off of the bed, muttering, and padded barefoot to the bathroom. He flipped the light on and walked across the cool ceramic tiles to the sink. He cranked the faucet handles hard, thinking of washers and plumbers and when the landlord would get around to fixing the cracks in the ceiling. And by the way, how come you haven't gotten around to cleaning the carpet like you promised last year?

He turned, ready to head back to bed and the shadows that danced there all night. Problem was …

… *tap tap tap* …

… some goddam faucet was dripping somewhere. Sounded like the tub now. Tap tap tap. Yeah, you bet. The landlord would be hearing some taps in the morning, and they would be on his door.

He threw the shower curtain aside …

… *tap tap tap* …

… and had to jam his jaws together tight to keep from screaming.

Blood was raining out of the walls. Rain like outside, red here inside. The ceiling was wet with it, blood drops were falling from the ceiling into the tub, which was brimming full and splashing on the floor. The walls dripped and ran with it. The showerhead was leaking blood. It bubbled and frothed, oozing out of the cracks between the chrome soap holder and the bleeding wall, running into the tub in streams.

The water jostled, stirred from within. Jonathan gaped at it with his eyes wide and bulging, a scream of horror gathering strength in his throat. Alison was rising to the surface, naked, her skin red as barn paint from the blood, her eyes wide and dead, peeking through the scum of bloody water as she bobbed to the top and began laboriously to try to clamber out of the bathtub.

Jonathan stumbled backward and thudded into a wall. Alison was standing in the blood now, trying to lift a foot. Rivers of blood were streaming out of her hair, dripping off her breasts, falling off her marble white skin that was nearly blue from loss of blood. The golden

heart he had bought for her birthday dangled at her throat, smeared with red. Her mouth was a shrunken rind, her hands wrinkled and loose from too much time in the water …

… *grave?* …

… the blood in the tub. She opened her mouth, but what came out was a great congealed bulb of blood that had gone almost brown with age. It plopped into the bathtub with a splash. She stared at Jonathan with eyes gone white and bloated.

“Jonathan … he stabbed me and drowned meeeee … he drowned me slow …”

She lifted a bone white leg out of the tub, lurching, almost falling. Her feet squeaked on the tiles as she came fully out. Blood sloshed across the floor, surfing over Jonathan’s bare feet. At this rate, Jonathan thought with a sudden burst of wild insanity, the blood’s gonna leak out to the rug and *I’ll* have to pay the landlord to have it cleaned.

“You have to stop him,” Alison gurgled.

Jonathan, wavering on the tightrope between the chasm that separates the sane from the insane, ventured to take another step and speak to this pitiful, blood-soaked impossibility. “I took care of him,” he managed to say. “He’s dead.”

She cranked her head slowly back and forth, her face full of sorrow and blood. “You have to stop him, Jonathaaaaannnn …”

“I did!”

“Have to stop him now, now. He’s learning how to move … no one can catch him but you … it will be a slaughter if you can’t …”

Jonathan nearly fell to his knees. “Alison, please! He’s gone! He’s history!”

“No, he’s not. He’s on the move. You have to stop him, stop him somehow. You have to …”

She jerked a hand to her throat and ripped the golden heart and chain from her neck. She thrust it at him, a thing that had been buried for a year and should be crawling with mold and putrefaction from her decomposing body. But no, it was real, she was real, the blood was real. It smelled like hot salt water, this ocean of blood.

“Remember our love, Jonathan. Use this to fight him.”

Jonathan scooted sideways, keeping distance between her and himself. He came to the open door and stumbled back into the bedroom. She advanced on him, looking like a skeleton wrapped in baggy flesh. Her face contorted and for a moment she looked like a lost child. Then she lunged at him.

He staggered backward, falling on the bed with her cold wet mouth

clamped over his, he screaming, making her floppy cheeks bellow in and out, spilling blood over him, dribbling it into his mouth, smothering him with decay …

… and he lurched up out of sleep with a scream that rattled the windows of his dinky apartment and would surely bring the wrath of his neighbors down on him, lousy landlord or not.

He sat up, his body sticking to the sheets with sweat. There was a dark drool of saliva on the pillow. The television produced the electric snow of a station off the air. It looked to be around five in the morning, the sun outside not yet ready to climb the sky, content instead with backlighting orange and purple clouds against the framework of the horizon. Jonathan wiped a shaking hand across his forehead. God, but these dreams were getting weird.

Something cold nudged his left hand, and he looked down.

Alison’s gold heart and chain lay on the sweat-soaked sheet, bloodless, looking as new as the day he had bought it. He drew back with a yelp, as if the heart had burned him. Then he regained control and picked it up.

“Jesus,” he whispered, and clamped his fist tight around it. It did not burn and there was no blood on it. Perhaps only the lingering aroma of Alison’s perfume from the day at the practice field when she had fished him out of the GatorAde. The day they fell in love.

Remember our love, Jonathan. Use this to fight him.

He disentangled himself from the sheets, confused, barely able to think. Alison had been here. The heart was proof positive. It was also proof impossible, because Alison was no more now than a gape-mouthed skull working on her second year in the grave. She had not been here.

He opened his hand and looked at the golden heart on its slim chain. He hesitated, then cautiously lifted it to his nose, expecting all manner of rot and stench.

Her perfume. Nothing more.

He got out of bed, ready to make the best of a day that would probably turn out bad anyway.

Chapter • Nine

The day was indeed rather horrible, as were the next two. When Friday came Jonathan called Coach Cooper and told him he was quitting the team. The coach said he was crazy and ought not to make prank calls. Jonathan told him he had to see this Pinker thing through to the end, and hung up while the coach was still pleading and begging him to either change his mind or see a psychiatrist or both.

Saturday rolled around. Jonathan stalked around his apartment, occasionally scratching his head while a whirlwind of thoughts churned through his brain. He sometimes dropped into a chair only to get right back up again to resume pacing. Where was Pinker? No way of knowing. Did he die in the wreck with the others? Anybody's guess. Did he even exist anymore at all? Again, no way of knowing.

He passed the bathroom, lingering a moment to relive the crazy nightmare with the bleeding apparition that had been Alison. The tub was clean, the porcelain glistening. Blood did not drip from the walls anymore, possibly never had. The crazy nightmare was a nightmare, and nothing else. But what about the golden heart and chain?

Explanations currently unavailable. Some things are best left alone and unexplained, because thinking about such impossibilities could lead to brain damage, manic obsession, lunacy. The heart and chain were in the pocket of his Levi's, where they would stay. Perhaps in a year or two he would begin seriously to ponder this miracle, but for now it seemed wiser to keep the old head screwed on tight and the thoughts under control.

He went back to pacing, waiting. Waiting for what? No idea.

Someone knocked on the door, making him jump. He walked over and reached for the knob. Probably some pesky kid selling magazine subscriptions or the like. Or even an insurance salesman, God help us.

He looked through the peep hole first. Someone vaguely familiar was outside, a white face that looked somehow sick. The pasty skin was sheened with sweat.

“What's your business?” Jonathan asked.

“Police, Jonathan. Your father, Lieutenant Parker, wants to see you down at the station. I have a car out here.”

“What's he want me for?”

“Don't know. He just said to get you.”

Jonathan shrugged to himself. Tooling around town in a cop car had to be better than this endless pacing. He began to unlock the door. The phone rang. The cop outside banged on the door again. Jonathan rolled his eyes. For three days, nothing. Now the place was Grand Central Station.

"Don't you here me in there, Jonathan? Open up?"

Bang bang bang. Ring ring ring. Jonathan discovered he had lost the ability to make simple decisions. He wavered between the door and the phone, wondering stupidly which one he ought to answer.

His answering machine ended his dilemma. He heard his own voice tell the caller he was out right now, and please leave a message after the beep.

It beeped. Don Parker's voice blared through the machine. "This is your dad, Jon. I thought I'd call you and tell you about that prison guard you wanted to see so badly, that Chadwick guy. It seems he's disappeared from the hospital. Nobody can figure out how, because he was pretty well banged up. I just wandered if you, uh, knew anything about this. Ah, the hell with it. Sorry I called."

Click.

Bang bang bang.

Jonathan looked through the peephole again. Chadwick, or not Chadwick? Who really gave a shit?

He discovered he was looking down the barrel of a gun. The rifling inside was visible as faint spirals that led to a bullet. He jumped sideways just as Chadwick fired. The peephole blew apart in a noisy explosion of glass and wood, showering Jonathan with sawdust. More holes sprouted, hammering the door like machine-gun fire. The smell of sawdust and bitter gun smoke grew heavy in the air.

The doorknob fell off.

Jonathan found he could make decisions again. He turned and sprinted for the back door, threw it open, and ran through his backyard, around the house. Perhaps the old Chevy would start today. Either that, or this would turn into that old Alfred Hitchcock trick: hero frantically dives into car, sticks the key in the ignition, car goes chugga chugga chugga while the bad guy gets closer. Please start. Oh please please please start.

Chugga chugga chugga.

Jonathan rounded the house, no longer considering the Chevy and its dubious battery. Chadwick was still busy blasting the door to splinters. His brown prison uniform was tattered and frayed. He was minus a shoe. His tangled hair stood out from his head like wires.

He spotted Jonathan and turned. Jonathan did a quick about-face as

he fired. A chunk of the house blew apart. Then Chadwick was coming, coming. Jonathan sprinted across the front yard, hurdling the fence like a pro while bullets bored smoking holes in the grass behind his feet. He was across the street as the fence jangled; Chadwick was laboriously climbing over it. Jonathan looked back, realizing that this Chadwick chap was not in the best of shape. He appeared to be moving by sheer force of will alone. Either that, or someone else was moving him. Chadwick got over the fence and staggered forward again, dragging his left foot, the bare one. He pointed the pistol at Jonathan, pulled the trigger, but all that came out was a very satisfying click. He howled with outrage and dug bullets out of his pistol belt. He jammed them inside with hands that were obviously shaking.

Jonathan used the time to put distance between him and the shambling thing that had been Chadwick. Murdock Street was on the left, leading toward the Maryville city park. He poured on the speed, sweating a little himself. This was no fun at all.

The gun began firing again. Jonathan ducked and dodged. Bullets sparked off the sidewalk, leaving tiny craters in the cement and ricocheting away with high, discordant whines. It was clear to Jonathan that Chadwick had not visited the target range for a long time. His pistol probably hadn't been fired in ages. This was all very fortunate, because even though Jonathan was running as fast as humanly possible, the inhuman thing behind him was staying close. Between shots Jonathan could hear him panting, hear his good foot slap the sidewalk, the bad one scrape along, doubtless raw and bleeding by now.

He came to the edge of the park, where a few people were leisurely strolling, a few were on blankets having a picnic, and a pair of heavy petters were sitting on a bench to the right, deeply engaged in mutual exploration. Jonathan swept past them while bullets chewed holes in the grass around him. The lovers looked up, startled. In fact the entire population of the park was gaping at Jonathan and his strange new shadow, Super-Chadwick.

Jonathan shouted over his shoulder as he ran, knowing it was useless but giving it a try anyway. "Chadwick! Why are you after me?"

To his surprise, Chadwick was kind enough to answer him. "You shut your goddam face, shithead! Get down on the ground *now!*"

What a grouch, Jonathan thought. "Pinker? Is that you?"

"No, it's the Avon lady, Jon-boy. Who do you think it is?"

Jonathan didn't need to answer. It was all quite clear now. He ducked behind a tree while Chadwick decorated the trunk with holes, then took off again while he reloaded. Soon enough the pistol started

popping again. Jonathan wondered just how long this mad chase would go on. Chadwick was obviously running low on energy. His breath rasped in his throat like sandpaper against steel. Sweat was running off him in a steady flow of drops. Jonathan laid on the speed, sensing victory at last.

Something stung him then, stung him on the shoulder like the world's largest wasp. He gasped with pain. Now blood was running down his arm in scarlet streamers, dripping from his fingertips. It looked brilliantly red under the glare of the midday sun. Jonathan felt himself getting woozy.

The shooting stopped. Jonathan glanced back.

Chadwick was slapping his belt, looking for bullets that were no longer there. He howled with animalistic rage and threw the gun at Jonathan. It thunked against his back and fell into the grass, no longer deadly, mission accomplished. Chadwick took a few more steps, then pitched face-first into the grass, as spent as his pistol. He raised his head.

"Hey, kid! Help me! Please help me!"

Jonathan stopped, turned, and appraised this new Chadwick doubtfully.

"Kid! Please help!"

Jonathan frowned. "Chadwick? Is that really you?"

"Yeah. How did I get out of the hospital? Where am I?"

Jonathan walked cautiously back to where he was lying, keeping a good bit of distance between them. His breath pumped up and down in his throat, seeming as hot as the sun. He wiped sweat from his face. "Chadwick? Do you feel like yourself again?"

Chadwick merely moaned. His face was almost as red as the blood running down Jonathan's arm. Jonathan felt a wave of pity for him. None of this had been his fault.

Someone shouted behind him. Jonathan whirled, expecting all manner of bad news, but it was only a balding fellow in a blue jogging suit. He trotted up, staring down at Chadwick. "What happened to that guy?"

Jonathan thought about it. What could he possibly say? "He … uh …"

He glanced back.

Chadwick was scrabbling at his own ankle. Jonathan saw the gleam of gunmetal.

Ankle holster. Old Chadwick was just full of surprises today.

Jonathan went wearily back to the duck-and-dodge routine. Bullets hissed past him, hitting trees with small explosions of wood, hitting

grass and blue sky. He heard the jogger squawk behind him, and looked back.

Chadwick had shot the man in the chest. He hit the ground with a thump. Chadwick began crawling toward him.

Jonathan found that he didn't care all that much. All he wanted was never to see Chadwick again.

He got his wish.

Fifteen minutes later he sagged against a bench at the other side of the park, breathing hard, trying to recuperate from the marathon run with Chadwick. His bullet wound throbbed with each beat of his heart, shafting pain down to his fingertips. He looked at his shoulder and felt the world go gray momentarily. Blood was still pulsing out of the jagged bullet hole and his tee shirt was in tatters there. He sat down, feeling light-headed and faint.

Something crashed against his ankle. He jerked upright, imagining Chadwick ready to strike again, but it was only a little girl on a tricycle. "Sorry, mister," she said, while Jonathan hopped around. He managed to smile at her.

"That's okay, sweetie. No harm done. I think you just hit my funny bone. You should take it easy on that thing, though."

She nodded. "I will."

He watched her go, thinking that at this rate he would be jumping at shadows for the rest of his life, expecting Pinker around every corner. He shook his head, swearing to himself that it would never happen. Paranoia was for other people, not Jonathan Parker.

Jonathan Pinker?

No. Parker. Period.

He turned and went down the sidewalk, heading home to wash out his bullet wound and see how serious it was. It came to him that he should call Don and tell him about the jogger getting shot, but it might be a safe bet that someone else had already done it. Chadwick had made enough noise during the chase, and a few minutes ago there had been a siren blasting away somewhere nearby.

He came to a bend in the sidewalk and stopped. The little girl's tricycle was heeled over on its side, one wheel still spinning. The bushes to the right were jostling. Jonathan frowned. What could she be doing in there?

"Hey, kid," Jonathan called, trying to spot her in the thick hedgerow. "Are you okay?"

Nothing. Then the jogger in the blue outfit staggered out. There was a circle of blood on his chest about the size of a dinner plate. He took

another step. His eyes rolled up to show nothing but the whites. He pitched forward, smashing face-first against the sidewalk. Jonathan jumped back with the glassy taste of fear filling his mouth. Nobody could possibly run the length of the park with a bullet in his chest. Unless he were superhuman. Or … not human at all.

Her name was Amanda and she was a sweet and innocent girl: blond hair, big blue eyes, and a Cupid's bow for a mouth. At this time none of that even mattered, because she wasn't feeling like herself right now. She hadn't felt like herself since the jogger in the blue outfit with the circle of blood on his chest had grabbed her and dragged her into the bushes. She had tried to scream, but then something strange happened, something electrical and smoky, and now all she could do was grin, her eyes narrowed down to black slits, her little hands clenched into fists.

She saw a huge yellow bulldozer about half a block away, where the hedges ended and the road began. Workers had been tearing up the street lately for no discernible reason. The road crew looked to be out to lunch. Amanda grinned her evil grin as she ran toward it. Her left foot dragged, as if perhaps someone had shot her through the knee a long time ago. She came to the bulldozer and clambered up to the driver's seat, moving nimbly, like a small blond monkey. She started the huge diesel engine, worked two levers while black smoke roared out of the exhaust. The dozer jumped forward, chewing up big chunks of asphalt under its massive treads, but this was not enough for Amanda. She opened her Cupid's bow mouth and screamed.

"Come on, you sucker—MOVE!"

It moved. It clawed over the curb. It bounced onto the grass and Amanda poured on the steam, her hair flapping in the wind, her teeth bared in a grimace of insane delight. She came to a small sapling and crushed it, howling with laughter.

She turned and headed straight for the bushes where the jogger had grabbed her.

Jonathan stumbled backward, unable to take his eyes off the dead man in blue. He barely noticed when a woman drew up beside him. She gasped, covering her mouth with both hands. She turned to Jonathan. "Is he dead?" she asked through her fingers. "Heart attack?"

Jonathan shook his head. "He took a bullet to the chest."

She regarded Jonathan, openly frightened. "You mean you shot him?"

"No."

“But look at all the blood on you. Was it a duel or something?”

“Of course not. We both got shot by the same guy.”

Her face went ghost white. “My little girl was riding that tricycle.” She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted. *“Amanda! Where are you?”*

Jonathan heard the belch of some huge engine nearby but disregarded it. The lady was going bonkers, wandering away and screaming for Amanda. The engine noise noise grew louder. Too loud to bear.

The bulldozer smashed through the bushes, howling and blatting, and headed straight for Jonathan, a screaming yellow demon guided by a seven-year-old lunatic. He dived out of the way, performing a double somersault on the sidewalk. The dozer’s right tread crunched over the dead jogger, spraying blood and gray clots of brain across the sidewalk.

It turned, the tread lubricated by the fat the jogger had intended to lose. Jonathan jumped up with hot exhaust blasting at his face. He decided this was the time to do some real running. He sprang into the hedgerow with the bulldozer a few spare feet behind him; after wildly clawing his way to the other side, Jonathan took off for the center of the park as fast as his legs had ever carried him. The bulldozer howled behind him, gaining speed.

Jonathan looked over his shoulder. His adrenaline surged, but he knew it was hopeless: the world’s fastest runner pumped full of steroids could never outdistance the bulldozer, which charged forward doing a good thirty miles an hour. It drew inexorably closer, close enough that Jonathan’s heels were kicking against the lower lip of its sharp metal blade.

The little girl shrieked and whooped, loving it. Jonathan was exhausted, his left shoulder aching abominably as he ran, tiny flakes of light dancing in front of his eyes like diamond dust. His lungs felt ready to burst.

He realized he was about to smash into a tree. He went straight for it, then dived off to the right, rolled once, and came up on his feet in time to see the girl frantically trying to turn the dozer in time to avoid a collision. No such luck. The bulldozer rammed into the tree, its blade gouging a large wedge of white wood out of the trunk. Leaves pinwheeled down. The dozer’s screaming motor groaned to a stop.

The girl tried to start it, but this time it was her turn to go chugga chugga chugga. Cursing like a drunken sailor, she jumped down and sprinted off the way she had come.

Jonathan invited his legs to another chase, legs that were wobbling and scissoring and in no mood for another lap. He started forward

regardless. Sweat was streaming into his eyes, making him blink. The girl was only ten yards ahead, her small white legs pumping out a good rhythym, a string of curses trailing behind her. Jonathan swallowed, vowing never again to run two miles at top speed without bringing a canteen along. But dehydrated as he was, his long legs were more than a match for the girl's short ones. He caught up to her and tackled her from behind. On the side of his vision he saw the frantic mother wandering around howling for Amanda. He wrestled the girl to the ground, amazed at her strength. She was kicking and clawing, going for his eyes. He pinned her arms to the ground and looked into her eyes.

"I'm gonna rip your lungs out, you son of a bitch!" she bellowed, squirming beneath him.

Jonathan saw what he needed to see. "Pinker, you get out of her!" he shouted. She spit in his face, her eyes glowing dull red with a strange sort of inner fluorescence. "Leave her alone!"

The mother caught sight of the commotion and ran over. Jonathan looked up and discovered he was about to be hit with a large and heavy-looking purse. He ducked, too late. *Whap!*

She swung again. He blocked the purse with an arm. "Lady, listen!" he shouted. "This isn't your little kid anymore!"

He didn't expect her to believe it, and she didn't. The purse assailed him from all angles. He supposed that if this were his and Alison's daughter, he'd be doing some swinging himself. Only Alison was dead, and …

He jerked up, ignoring the flying purse. He dug in a pocket and pulled out the golden heart on its chain. Little Amanda saw it and quit squirming. Her red eyes grew large.

"Not that," she whispered, obviously terrified. Jonathan smiled as he was beat about the head and shoulders. Pinker was too scared to move.

Jonathan stood up, swatting at the pesky purse, pleading with the mother to stop, for Christ's sake, because he was not a kidnapper or pervert. She ignored him, a human banshee with a purse that could flatten the average boxer. Jonathan twisted around, begging her to stop and listen to reason. Cute little Amanda used the opportunity to kick out with one shoe on one little foot. Jonathan caught the blow exactly where she wanted it: the family jewels. He went down like a falling tree. The heart and chain fell out of his hand into the grass. The purse just went on and on.

He reached for the heart and chain, scrabbling at the grass while his insides churned in agony. He snagged it with a finger and flipped it over onto the girl's chest just as she was about to get up.

What happened next was so strange and terrifying that Jonathan began to doubt his sanity again. Something boiled out of the girl's chest, took nebulous form as Pinker in the orange overalls he had worn the day he died, and floated for a moment a few feet off the ground. Jonathan smelled a strange, unworldly smoke. Then it snapped sideways, crashing onto the frantic mother with a buzzing, electrical noise, a sound like huge power lines breaking in a storm. She fell down with a shriek, convulsing again and again in mindless agony. Amanda sat up and began to cry.

Her mother became suddenly still. Then she rose up on one elbow and looked calmly at Jonathan. "Ready for round two, asswipe?"

Jonathan nearly wept. It wasn't over, perhaps had just begun, but he didn't have the strength to fight anymore today. He barely had the strength to stand up. His guts still ached from the kick. He backed away with a low groan of denial. This couldn't be happening.

He saw a huge man running toward him, a man in a sweaty tee shirt and baggy worker's pants. He was carrying a pick. Jonathan sighed with relief. He could use a backup about now.

The man drew close, panting. He stepped between Jonathan and Amanda's mother. "I heard all the noise clear over there in the road. Is this creep bugging you, ma'am?"

She reached toward him, as if needing help to stand. The man took her hand, grinning with foppish pride that he had saved the day. There was a huge electrical snap, a bolt of blue light between them. The mother fell back with a groan. The worker doubled over as if he had taken a bullet to the stomach. Slowly, though, he was able to straighten again. Jonathan's heart sank into his shoes. The worker was still grinning, but it was the hideous leer of a madman. His eyes glowed a dismal red. He craned around to look at Jonathan.

Jonathan jumped for the heart and chain that had fallen from the girl's chest. The big man slammed one pointy end of the pick into the ground, nearly boring through Jonathan's groping hand. A heavy work boot kicked out, catching Jonathan under the chin. He flipped over, stunned, his teeth filled with drilling pain. His eyes squirted unwanted tears and he felt a powerful urge to sneeze. The worker lifted the pick. The heart and chain dangled from it. He swept it past Jonathan's face, taunting.

"Say goodbye to your sweetie," he growled, and heaved the pick with its burden of jewelry incredibly far away, where the rushes and cattails grew at the rim of a small lake, the part of the park where people came to toss stale bread at the ducks. It splashed into the blue-brown water at least one hundred feet out, sending a small geyser sparkling into the air.

He turned on Jonathan again, digging in one baggy pocket. His hand came out holding a large clasp knife. He snapped it open. The blade glittered wickedly in the sunlight. “Time to take your medicine, Jonny. Time to swallow it all up.”

He lunged forward, laughing.

Jonathan ran, weak and sick, ready to faint. The worker chased him only a few yards, then quit. His eyes gleamed, eyes drawn down to slits, eyes burning with eerie red light. He watched as Jonathan staggered toward the bushes and the sidewalk there, chuckling to himself, strangely happy, strangely content.

Chapter • Ten

Coach Cooper's house was located about a mile down on Hudson Street in a middle-class suburb where the houses were well kept, the lawns green and thick, the streets full of children on bicycles and dogs running loose. At times the Saturday sound of lawn mowers was deafening. Perhaps, Jonathan had sometimes wondered, the coach had dreamed the American Dream and made it come true. At any rate, welcome to suburbia, which was a damn sight closer than Jonathan's own home.

He recognized the familiar light blue house surrounded by tall hedges, and staggered up the sidewalk to Cooper's front door, looking like a man returning from battle. His brown hair had become a sweaty tangle. His eyes seemed overly large for his face as he glanced around, full of apprehension and fear and the paranoia he swore would never be his. His skin had turned a wan yellow-white. The blood on his arm had dried by now, turned into zigzags of brown against the paleness of his skin.

He got to the door and slumped against it, one hand weakly feeling for the doorbell, the other pressed to the scabbed-over hole in his shoulder. He heard footsteps but was unable to right himself before the door was pulled open. He collapsed in a heap on the coach's light blue carpet in the coach's light blue living room. The coach yelped. Strong hands hoisted Jonathan immediately upright. His eyes found their focus and he was staring at Rhino.

"What the hell?" Rhino barked. "Which skyscraper did you fall off of?"

"Get him onto the couch," the coach said. "Pac-Man, make room."

Pac-Man jumped up, and Jonathan was dragged to the couch. Light blue, Jonathan noticed without caring. The man is a light blue freak.

"Rhino, tear his shirt off," the coach ordered, taking command as usual. "Pac-Man, I've got a first-aid kit in the bathroom, middle shelf above the sink. Jonathan, you just relax. Try not to talk. What happened?"

Jonathan almost chuckled, his mind wandering to some misty dreamland where pain was a memory and Alison was alive. He let his eyes drift shut, glad to be off his feet, even if the coach was bellowing orders like Patton.

Something stung him, and he jerked awake.

“I knew that one would get him,” the coach said. Jonathan smelled iodine. How had everybody moved so fast?

“You’ve been snoozing on us, Jonathan,” the coach said, dabbing more iodine on Jonathan’s wound. It stung worse than the bullet had. He tried to edge away from it.

“Hold still.”

Jonathan kept moving away. “Why are all of you here, anyway?” he asked, jerking away from the cotton ball that was soaked in red poison.

“Trying to figure out a way to get you back on the team, Jon. Damn, I wish you’d hold still. Pac-Man, you wrap him up with that gauze. Rhino, make him quit wiggling.”

Rhino put both hands on his chest, mashing him into the couch. Jonathan gurgled in protest. Rhino eased up a bit.

“Now,” Cooper said as Pac-Man began to wrap his shoulder, “what the hell *did* happen to you?”

“Pinker,” Jonathan croaked. “Shot me.”

Rhino grunted. The coach sighed. Pac-Man was busy winding gauze and possibly hadn’t heard.

“Pinker,” Jonathan said, more clearly this time. “Shot me with a pistol. He could be outside right now. Coach, do you have a gun here?”

“Only one for suicide attempts whenever we lose a game. What really happened?”

Jonathan shrugged inwardly. It was now or never if he intended to convince anybody. He started at the point where Chadwick blew the front door to pieces, and ended with the road worker throwing the pick a zillion miles. When he was done he waited for reactions.

“Let’s assume you’re right about this,” the coach said. “Let’s say Pinker shot you. It’s safe to assume *somebody* did. But since he’s after *you,* I’d say you should talk to your dad about being placed in protective custody.”

Jonathan shook his head. “I can’t go and hide and let Pinker kill anybody he wants. Somehow, I’m going to get him.”

Cooper frowned. “I don’t get it. You’re saying Pinker’s alive somehow, and can just jump in and out of people like the goddam clap or something?”

“I know it sounds crazy, but that’s what he’s doing. Maybe he’s using electricity—because of the electric chair and all, the weird way he died. All I know for sure is that I’ve seen him do it four times today. Right now he’s a big guy in a white tee shirt, a road worker

over on Glover Street, where they're tearing up the road."

The coach looked grim. "I wonder why they're doing that. They do it every summer. Sure messes up traffic."

Jonathan gaped at him. "Pinker's out there, and you're worried about traffic? What about Pinker?"

"Let's just go grab him. No big deal."

"Yeah," Rhino said, grinning. "We'll break his neck. I'd *love* to break his neck."

Jonathan shook his head, exasperated. "Rhino, you'd be killing an innocent person. That's the whole problem."

Cooper stroked his chin. "Maybe you just hit that goalpost too hard."

"Wait a minute," Pac-Man put in. "The whole nervous system is electrical. It's theoretically possible for an outside force to take it over, same as a terrorist can take over a TV station."

"Then why not just do it the way you got away from that prison guard?" Cooper said. "You can outrun anybody Pinker gets into, and when they're out of energy, Pinker's forced back out. *Then* we break his neck!"

"Won't work," Jonathan said. "He's not forced out that way until he uses up all the life of the person he's in. I can't kill people just to get Pinker out."

A new thought struck him. "There's one way to force him out on the spot, before he can kill the body he's in."

"Fine," Cooper said. "Tell me what it is, and I'll get you ten of them."

Jonathan sighed. "There's only one, and it's at the bottom of the lake in the park."

Cooper frowned. "Bottom of the lake?"

"Yep. I know pretty much where it is, so it shouldn't be too hard. I've got a diving mask in my closet back home. I just need you guys to get it."

Cooper stared at him for a while. Then he said, "I'll get your mask and meet you at the park in half an hour."

Pac-Man finished with the gauze and clipped it together. "I can get you some fresh clothes, and something to eat, too. No problem."

Jonathan sat up. "Thanks, guys. I'll never forget this." He wobbled to his feet. Rhino steadied him. He tried to go to the door but Rhino held on. "What now?" Jonathan said, irritated.

"I'm not letting you out of my sight. Tonight we're all on the same team again."

Jonathan smiled. “Sounds good to me.”

Pac-Man and the coach went out and eased the door shut. They looked at each other for a long time. Then the coach shrugged.

“He *is* nuts, am I right?”

“Out of his skull, Coach,” Pac-Man agreed. “Absolutely off his rocker. But that doesn’t make him stupid.”

“Let’s get it over with, then. I’ll drive.”

They went out to Cooper’s van, both reaching for their car keys out of habit. The sun was beginning to fall to the horizon, dappling the clouds above with beams of orange light.

Coach Cooper started his car. Pac-Man looked at the keys in his hand and laughed.

They drove away, just as …

… a beefy man in a white tee shirt crawled out of the bushes that ringed the house. His eyes glowed as red as the sunset.

His tongue was hanging out. He was grinning.

More than an hour later Jonathan and Rhino were standing in the late-evening shadows at the muddy shore of the lake, Jonathan watching every movement in the park, every pedestrian, every car driving past. Rhino was leaning casually against the black shape of a tree, picking his fingernails and humming some catchy tune to himself. When he began to get too loud Jonathan hissed at him to be quiet.

Rhino blew out a noisy breath. “What are you so jittery for? You’ve got Rhino here to protect your young ass. I told you I’m going to break the animal’s neck if he shows up.”

It was Jonathan’s turn to make strange noises. “Haven’t you comprehended it yet? You’d be killing the wrong person!”

“Gotcha,” Rhino said, obviously not getting it at all. He went back to humming. Jonathan felt like strangling him …

… *like father, like son?* …

… but instead contented himself with alternately staring at his watch and staring at the shadows in the park. “Damn,” he muttered after a few fruitless minutes.

Rhino looked up. “Huh?”

“Coach isn’t coming. He’s having a good laugh right now with Pac-Man. Probably sharing some beer with him while we stand here with our thumbs up our asses.”

“Nah,” Rhino said, snapping his fingers to that catchy inner tune now. “No way the coach would jerk you around like that. Bee-bop-a-

doo-wap."

That involuntary urge to kill Rhino on the spot surfaced again. The big lummox was taking all of this too easy. "He's an hour and fifteen minutes late, for Christ's sake. Does that sound like something the coach would do?"

"Guess not."

Jonathan shivered in the cool evening breeze blowing off the silent waters of the lake, growing more uncertain and miserable by the second. "Maybe the cops are all over the place. People saw me running from that Chadwick guy."

"Could be, I suppose."

Jonathan ignored him, on his own now. "Pinker's going to start killing again, tonight if I don't stop him. I can feel it coming. Shit, it may be happening right now!"

Rhino pushed himself away from the tree. "Hold on a minute, Jon. No need to work yourself up like this."

Jonathan was already stalking toward the lake's swampy edge. Ducks quacked, irritated at being disturbed, and the nearby crickets and frogs stopped singing their songs. "I have to get that thing before it's too late!" he shouted back to Rhino. "Go on home and sing your damned songs!"

Rhino jogged after him. Jonathan walked into the water, arms outstretched for balance as his feet dredged up soupy mud, nearly making him splash face-first into the black water. Rhino waded in after him. "Tell me what you're looking for, and maybe I can get it for you. You can't swim with that hole in your shoulder."

Jonathan stopped with the cool water lapping at his knees. "You can't see anything in this muck without a mask and a flashlight—no one can." He turned around, nearly falling again. The musky stench of mud and duck shit was floating in the air, thick enough to make his stomach squirm. "I've got to go to my place." He charged out of the water, splashing Rhino, who immediately turned and followed. Jonathan began the torturous run to his house with water sluicing out of his pants and surfing over his shoes.

Rhino caught up to him and jerked him to a stop. "What do you mean, *I've* gotta go? What's with this *I* stuff? *We* gotta go, 'cause I'm with you all the way on this."

Jonathan pulled away, growing desperate and angry. "Get lost! No deal!" He turned and ran again.

Rhino turned on the speed and caught up again, jogging sideways with his big feet thumping on the grass, his wet shoes squeaking. "Screw you, Jonathan. You need a friend, and that friend is Rhino,

and that's the deal. Get me?"

Jonathan angled away from him. Rhino's hands scrabbled at the back of his shirt, trying to pull him back. Jonathan shrugged them off. Then Rhino lunged, captured two fistfuls of shirt, and spun Jonathan around. "Think you're the only man on the planet all of a sudden? We're on the same team, remember? All for one, and one for all? Did you forget that, hotshot?"

That strange urge bobbed to the surface of Jonathan's consciousness again, that horrifying desire to smash Rhino's big face in. He gave in and popped him once on the cheekbone. In the ten seconds of silence that followed, the world seemed to hold its breath. No crickets alive, no frogs, no ducks to shit in the water and make it foul. Just Jonathan and his best friend, who now looked as if he'd been shot.

"I … I'm sorry, Rhino … I … I … uh …" His voice trailed off to nowhere. Rhino's face looked suddenly haggard and grim in the dying light. When he spoke his voice was low, almost a murmur.

"You know what I could do to you if I wanted to, right? I could break you in so many pieces they'd need a microscope to find what's left. But that's not what I want. I know what I want, but I don't think you do."

Jonathan hung his head. "Sorry, Rhino, but on this one you're not my friend. I already caused one person I loved to get killed, and I'm not going to do it again. This one I do myself."

He cleared his throat softly. "In other words, if you want to be my friend, leave me alone."

More silence. The park had died. Rhino rubbed his nose and sighed. Then he shuffled around and walked away.

Jonathan started off in the other direction, toward home and the only hope of ending the nightmare. His shoulder burned like red coals, aching, aching. It didn't matter. Only one thing mattered now, and it was at the bottom of a lake, possibly buried in mud a foot deep, possibly gone for good.

But he ran anyway. There was nothing else to do.

Chapter • Eleven

It was at the point when Jonathan found it hard to rake air into his overworked lungs that his tiny apartment building loomed in the growing moonlight. His elderly Chevrolet was parked at the curb out front, nothing changed, nothing wrong. No sign of the coach's familiar van; he and Pac-Man were doubtless back at the coach's place, whooping it up with a six-pack of beer. Well, they could forget about Jonathan ever rejoining the football team. This was the last laugh they would have at his expense.

The house was dark. Neighboring houses backlit the white siding the landlord had finally gotten around to putting up after the old gray asphalt siding rotted away, and except for the front door, everything was as it should be.

He slowed to a walk, opened the fence gate, and went the short distance to the front. The door looked as if it had been to the moon and back, charred and cratered. It hung slightly ajar on its battered hinges. Jonathan forced himself to breathe easier, telling himself that no, there was no danger here. No Pinker, no danger.

He shoved the door slowly open with the flat of one hand, peering inside, his breath now frozen in his chest by this god-awful fear that capriciously came and went whenever his mind dwelled too long on the name Pinker. Once more he told himself that no one was here. He picked up the ruined doorknob from where it had fallen on the floor and jammed it back in place. To his surprise, it latched. Chalk another one up to Lady Luck.

He stepped fully inside. Moonlight drifted in through the west windows, faint and bone white, turning the furniture into ghostly humps, the floor a black pit. He decided enough was enough, and flipped up the switch to the hallway light. It glowed alive instantly, killing the Halloween appearance of the rooms.

Oooch, Jonathan thought. Don't think about killing.

He breathed a long, whistling sigh of relief as the fear drained out of his system, thinking, *Thank you, God, that no one is here and I am safe. Perhaps I will become a priest or minister, even a rabbi if you deliver me from this evil.*

He grinned to himself. Worn out, out of breath, bullet wound in the shoulder, and here he was making mental jokes with himself. Ain't it cute. He went back to the brown slab of Swiss cheese that had been

his door and pushed it firmly shut. Once more he surveyed the place, once more convincing himself that nothing was out of order.

He headed to the closet at the end of the hallway to get the diving mask. He passed the bathroom door. It was shut. Big deal, he thought. Sometimes I leave it shut. Only …

… only someone was taking a shower inside.

His heart jumped into his throat and rebounded to the insoles of his shoes. Not again, please not again. Not Alison again. It was too much to bear.

He eased the door open. Moonlight beamed through the single window above the toilet, showing a room filled with steam. The noise of water in the shower shifted pitch as the Someone inside moved about. Shoes clunked against porcelain, and squeaked much as Rhino's big shoes had squeaked when they were wet.

Spiffy, Jonathan thought as new terror surged through his veins. The boogeyman is taking a shower in my bathtub, it has to be the boogeyman because who else but the boogeyman (or Alison?) would smear huge quantities of blood all over the walls, the mirror, track blood in big footprints that dead-ended at the tub? For God's sake, who else?

And who would write this on one wall …

STOP HIM JONATHAN PLEEEASE

… but Alison. No boogeyman at all, just a pretty girl who died last year and has the pesky habit of popping up through the drain and scaring the living shit out of me.

The shoes in the shower went on clunking. The water splashed one way, the other way, now straight down. Clunk clunk clunk.

Jonathan swept the shower curtain aside with one big swipe, knowing that this time Alison would be as she really was, belly bloated and split open with decay, skull pushing through the maggoty flesh of her melting face, hands stitched to each other on her stomach just as the mortician had stitched them when he bled her like a hanging pig and squirted two gallons of formaldehyde through her veins. Teeth yellow, fingernails rotted off, hair a wet clump barely hanging on to the mushy goop that had been her scalp, jaw wrenched open because the gums that had held the giant jaw staple had rotted, lips that were wrinkled and soggy like a tomato left in the sun to rot.

But had they buried her in her shoes?

"Alison?" he said, cringing back.

He peeked through the steam and gloom.

Nope. Not Alison this time. Something, perhaps, that was worse.

The coach had not bothered to take his clothes off before getting into the shower. He was drenched with blood, standing partially away from the stream of water, his pants soaked with water and blood. He was rinsing a large butcher knife over and over. Its shiny blade gleamed weakly in the flat moonlight.

He turned and gave Jonathan an evil smile. “Evening, Jonathan. Alone now, hmm?”

Jonathan staggered backward. The smell of blood was worse than the stagnant water of the lake had been. His back thudded into a wall. “Coach Cooper?” he asked, knowing it was not.

Cooper held the knife up for him to see. “If someone gets in your way, you gotta run right through him. Remember what I told you?”

He climbed out of the tub, favoring one leg that seemed lame. He took a splashing step through the blood, giggling. “I’m gonna rip your heart out, Jonathan!”

Jonathan didn’t wait around to see if this was true. He bolted through the door and slammed it shut, then headed for the front door. Behind him the bathroom door exploded in a gigantic burst of wood chips as Cooper charged through, shrieking and bellowing. His head swiveled back and forth, his eyes bulged and glassy. He grinned again.

“No more Mister Nice Guy!” he roared, and charged at Jonathan, who was within arm’s reach of the remains of the front door. Cooper scurried over on his uneven legs while water flooded out of his pants, running blindingly fast for a cripple, and tackled Jonathan at the knees. Both went down, Jonathan with a yelp of surprise, Cooper with a satisfied grunt. The thing that had been the coach slid on the wet floor and banged against the door. He pushed himself up on his hands, the right one clutching the cleanly washed knife. He swung at Jonathan, who jerked backward while the blade cut the air with a loud whooshing noise, barely missing his throat.

Jonathan jumped up, sliding and skating on the floor. Cooper struggled to his feet, using holes in the door as finger grips. His eyes seemed to gleam with that awful reddish color.

“Ah, God,” Jonathan moaned. “Not you. Coach.”

He laughed, no longer with the voice of the irascible coach, but instead with the voice Jonathan had heard in so many dreams, so many living nightmares. It was the grating, howling voice of Pinker.

“Cooper’s gone bye-bye, asshole. You too!”

He lunged. The whispering blade cut past Jonathan’s left ear as he jumped sideways. The knife punched through the wall behind him all the way to the hilt. Plaster dust puffed out. Pinker grunted, trying to pull it free. Jonathan did the first thing that came to mind, making

mental apologies to the coach if he ever regained control of his body.

He slammed a foot sideways against Pinker's bad knee, putting all his body weight into it. Pinker went down with a scream, knife forgotten, holding his ruined knee in both hands while the back of his shirt sopped up the pink water he had dragged with him from the bathroom. Jonathan tried the door but Pinker was blocking it with his body, and the coach had never been a lightweight.

"Get you," Pinker groaned, looking up at him with his familiar flat and stupid gaze. "Messed with me the last time …"

Jonathan ran for the bedroom, slammed the door shut, and did the thing he had seen dozens of times on television and at the movies: he dragged a chair across the room and propped it under the doorknob, feeling idiotic and helpless. It was the only action he could think of, the only option available. Predictably, Pinker began pounding on the door. It actually seemed as if it might hold. Jonathan snapped the light on, still looking around for some kind of barricade, or weapon if it came to that.

His closet door was open. On the shelf above his shirts, his old reliable Louisville Slugger was lying with the other junk and garbage he tended to toss up there. Keepsakes, some of them, a few ancient trophies, bags of half-eaten McDonald's Quarter Pounders (probably petrified by now), nameless trash. He hurried over and reached for the bat while Pinker hammered the door to pieces.

A thick length of twine was tied to the narrow end, the place where you grabbed that old bat and let her fly at those oncoming balls. Only there was blood on the twine, fresh blood. Jonathan jerked on it, wishing he had a knife, wondering why the hell Pinker had done something as moronic as tying twine to his bat.

The pounding stopped. Pinker giggled, muffled through the door. "Jonathan," he said between giggles, "don't look down!"

Jonathan froze. Don't look down? What in the hell???

He looked down.

He was standing in a widening pool of blood.

Pinker cackled. "I told you not to look down!"

Jonathan jerked the bat furiously while his sweaty hair flung drops through the room. He slipped in the blood and fell backward, still holding the bat. A thing, some dark thing tied to the other end of the twine, rolled off of the topmost shelf and fell on top of Jonathan like a sack full of bones and old meat. Jonathan heaved it away, revolted, smelling blood everywhere. He backpedaled away from the growing circle of blood, getting it on his hands, his shoes, the ass of his jeans. He stood up, grimacing.

The sack was not quite a sack. At one time, fairly recently by the looks of it, it had been a young fellow nicknamed Pac-Man by his friends, actual name Roy Stuart. Status: dead. Cause of death: multiple slash wounds, the most noticeable one the slash that formed a grinning circlet across his throat, where severed cartilage gleamed a loathsome white in the depths of his larynx. His skin was nearly blue, his eyes open in an eternal stare of disbelief.

Jonathan felt his mind teeter over that same chasm that separates sane from insane, normal from abnormal. It was all really just too much. And now, to add to the fun, Pinker began demolishing the bedroom door while Jonathan stared at his dead friend. The absurd chair splintered and skittered across the room. The door sprouted fists that came in and out of new places, wrecking it. And then Pinker stepped through still clad in the flesh of the coach, smiling, stupidly proud of his handiwork. He leveled two blazing red eyes at Jonathan.

“Pac-Man liked you too much, Jonathan. He wouldn’t let me in. Can you believe it? Wouldn’t let me in. That’s a definite no-no. Now, time to die, sweetie.”

He took a step forward, but only one. A sudden wash of brilliant light behind him made him stop, made him look back. Jonathan’s eyes grew even wider than they had when Pac-Man came tumbling down. The bathroom with its demolished door seemed ablaze with pure white light. From the center of this Alison stepped out, not the disgusting corpse that Jonathan had imagined, but a being of radiance and calm, beauty and purity.

Pinker executed an awkward turn to face her, his arms hanging slack, the knife dangling. She looked at him, and spoke.

“Cooper, for your own sake fight him. *Don’t let him have your soul!”*

Jonathan walked toward her, no longer afraid of Pinker, who seemed mesmerized. Jonathan put a hand on his shoulder. “Coach? It’s just like you said. Everything’s a matter of will. *Will him out.”*

Pinker’s face began to distort, as if a huge conflict were going on inside. His eyes lost their glow again and again. He shivered in agony like a man undergoing the rack.

“Do it, Coach,” Jonathan said. “Do it!”

Pinker lashed out suddenly with the knife, nearly spilling Jonathan’s guts in a heap on the floor. Jonathan edged away, looking at the knife, looking at the face. If it was the coach resurfacing, he was not enjoying it at all. The hand that held the knife tried to thrust it again, but the other hand, the coach’s left hand, snapped out and restrained it. Then Cooper with his own voice. “Jonathan—he’s so strong—I can’t get him out—”

Pinker’s hand jerked free of the left one as the flame in his eyes took

over again. Once more the left hand, the coach's, tried to grab it. Then the knife snapped down and stabbed through the left one. Blood squirted. Pinker pulled the knife out and pressed the bleeding hand to his grinning mouth. Jonathan looked away as he drank the coach's blood, drooling and slurping.

He looked at Jonathan with blood running down his chin like melting lipstick. "I can eat this wimp's willpower for breakfast, Jon-boy, and drink his blood for lunch. And I think you know what supper's gonna be."

Jonathan nodded. His own willpower was ebbing fast. The shimmering form of Alison seemed out of action; she looked on with her face full of sorrow and pity.

Pinker raised the knife as Jonathan gathered himself for this uneven battle. Blood dripped off the tip of the blade, the coach's own blood. Pinker started forward. He stopped with a squawk, looking baffled. His mouth fell open.

"I'm willing this for you, Jonathan. I want you to get this bastard."

It was Cooper's voice. His bleeding left hand came up and clutched the other one. They wobbled, lurching back and forth, the hands of a man performing arm wrestling with himself. Slowly the knife turned away from Jonathan and began to aim itself at Pinker's own chest.

His eyes flared. He began to bellow

"Noooooooo!"

and then the knife slipped neatly through his ribs and into his heart. He crashed to the floor. For a moment, before his eyes slid shut forever, he smiled at Jonathan. But even as Coach Cooper died, the smoking, foul-smelling ectoplasm that was Pinker boiled out of his chest, still shrieking with anger and pain. Jonathan reached out to snag his ghostly arm. Alison cried out, but too late. Jonathan was seared by a tremendous blast of electrical discharge that spun him around and hurled him across the bedroom. He skidded to the east wall and smashed against it with his head, hard enough to crack the plaster. His eyes closed and stayed that way. The bizarre shadow that was Pinker, a shadow wearing fluorescent orange overalls with a checkered band across his chest, floated over, shimmering dark and light again, as if the blast of electricity had drained him, as if his flame were about to be extinguished at last.

Alison moved to block his way, standing over Jonathan, shining with that pure, radiant energy. It drove Pinker back, and he snarled at her.

"Get out of my way, bitch! *I need a body!"*

"Go back to hell where you belong, Pinker," she said firmly.

He howled with pain and rage, convulsing, losing light and power. His shape staggered toward the shattered door, heavily dragging the left foot but making no sound on the floor. He stepped through, turned right, and was gone.

The radiance that was Alison sank down beside Jonathan. She touched his face, caressing it with fingers made of light. Jonathan slept his dreamless sleep. She bent and whispered in his ear. “Jonathan, I have something very important to tell you. Wake up!”

He stirred in his sleep.

Barely shining, crackling with the dying remnants of power, Pinker lurched down the hallway to the door, wavering, dying, about to wink out. His ghostly face was twisted with pain and helplessness. He fell to his knees, too drained to go on. In desperation he tried to get to his feet, but they were no longer there. He shrieked in horror, looking around wildly, ready to stutter out like a used-up light bulb.

His fading red eyes snapped to the wall beside him. If he had had the strength, he would have smiled.

Wall socket. Electricity.

Power.

His right hand moved feebly toward the socket. With effort he raised his arm, aiming with the last of his strength. His fingers seemed to lengthen, growing longer even as the rest of him sputtered out. No longer firm, they passed easily through the narrow slots of the socket. Nothing happened.

Noooooo! Pinker screamed without sound, and jabbed his fingers deeper.

Electricity popped out of the socket, a shower of blue sparks, surging up his arm and into the rest of him. The hallway light dimmed to a dismal orange, the hallway itself lit now only by the growing, glowing force that was Pinker recharged. He looked like a junkie finally getting his fix: eyes half shut with pleasure, shuddering in ecstasy, a satisfied smile spreading across his face.

“Contact,” he murmured.

Someone rapped on the door. Pinker shot to his feet, his fingers still stretched to the socket, looking left and right for an escape route. The door was hammered again, and someone was yelling.

“Open up in there, Jonathan. Come on, open the door. This is Don.”

Pinker recoiled, fresh hatred surging through his being, looking now like a trapped animal. He glanced wildly around, then back down to the socket. A crazy smile settled itself on his face; he seemed to have realized something profoundly important. “Wait a minute,” he said

softly. “Can I?”

Jonathan sat up groggily while Alison hovered near him, her mission accomplished. He ground his knuckles into his eyes, then touched the crown of his head. Quite a bump there. He looked at Alison. “You swear that’s true?”

She nodded. “I swear it.”

Jonathan realized someone was pounding on the front door, shouting. Alison looked at Jonathan, seeming apprehensive. “Don’t forget,” she whispered, and vanished in a gush of sudden wind.

Jonathan was alone again.

Pinker almost cackled at his discovery and his cunning. Just as the doorknob fell off under the insistent pounding of Don Parker, Pinker let himself surge through the electricity in the socket, using it as a propellant, forcing himself to be sucked into the socket and the electrical maze behind it. Hot blue sparks belched out of the socket, spinning crazily on the floor like Chinese fireworks. The hallway light fixture sizzled a moment, then exploded like a bomb, showering the darkened hall with hot chunks of metal and glass.

The door swung open, banged against the wall, and slammed shut again. Don Parker pushed it open again, easier this time, calling for Jonathan. He sniffed, smelling the acrid aroma of cooked wiring. “Smells like the goddam electric chair in here,” he muttered. He tried the light switch and got nothing. He frowned, drawing his automatic pistol out of his shoulder holster, a trusty Browning double-stacked nine-millimeter, sixteen rounds of death in each clip. He had taken to carrying three or four clips since the murders started. He edged down the hallway lit only by the subdued light of the moon, his pistol ready.

“Jonathan?” he whispered. He looked back to the door. It wasn’t reassuring. “Yo, Jonathan?”

He decided to shut up. The bedroom light was on, a dim rectangle twelve feet away. He edged toward it, crunching over ruined glass, passing the kitchen entrance, which was dark. He peered inside, listening. Someone was breathing, but it wasn’t in here. It was coming from the bedr—

“FREEZE,” Don shouted at the shadow that had lumbered out of the bedroom and was coming slowly down the hall.

“Don?” Jonathan asked weakly.

Don let his breath out. “Jesus H. Christ, Jon. I could have shot you!”

“Would have been a fine capper for the evening.”

“Huh? What’s been going on here? I thought I heard a fight. And

what happened to your door?”

“Pinker,” Jonathan responded, his voice full of weariness. “He’s here. Didn’t you see him?”

“I can’t even see *you* in this light.” He stepped closer, squinting. “Are you all right?”

Jonathan let out a dismal chuckle. “You’d never believe me.”

“Well,” Don said, putting his pistol away, “I thought you’d be interested to know that there’s an APB out on you. Half a dozen people witnessed you and that Chadwick guy in the park. Seems he’s dead now, too.”

Jonathan nodded. “What was Chadwick doing out of the hospital, anyway? Why was he in uniform?”

“Oversight, I guess.” Don fished a cigarette out of his shirt pocket, then fumbled in his pants for his lighter. “We didn’t have a guard posted by his door. Should have, I guess.”

He struck his aging Zippo. In the dancing yellow light he saw Jonathan’s clothes, splattered with blood, torn in places. His shoes were red almost to the tops. Blood had dribbled down his forehead in crimson lines. “Holy shit,” he blurted. “What the hell have you been up to?”

Jonathan looked away. “I wanted Pinker dead so much, and when I got that wish it only made him stronger.” He shook his head, avoiding Don’s questioning stare. “Do you think I killed that prison guard in the park?”

Don shrugged a little. “Hell if I know. You’re sure talking screwy enough. But if you did, you must have scared him to death.”

“Huh?”

“There wasn’t a mark on him. He was just … dead.” Don took a long drag of his cigarette, eyeing Jonathan critically. Down the hall, the bedroom light jerked down to black, then jumped on again. “What the hell’s wrong with your lights?” he asked Jonathan.

“Don’t know. And if I did, you wouldn’t believe me.”

Don hesitated, trying to find Jonathan’s eyes with his own. He reached out and turned him back toward him, eye to eye. “We’ve been family a long time, through all the ups and downs. I’ve watched you turn a screwed-up childhood into straight A’s and a football scholarship. I’ve been proud to be your father and I could never see you as a killer.”

He worked on his cigarette some more. “Besides, Chadwick’s body was a … husk. Same as—”

“Same as Pinker’s.”

“Yeah.” Tired of the dark, Don went to the kitchen doorway and

flipped the switch. Nothing. He went past Jonathan toward the bedroom, muttering something about cheap light bulbs and an ashtray. Jonathan swallowed, realizing that Don would see things that shouldn't be seen. He tried to stop him, but Don only frowned and pointed to his cigarette. He walked into the light while Jonathan slumped against the wall, eyes pressed shut, heart sinking to new lows. He knew what would come next, as surely as he knew Pinker was dead yet alive and that no one knew it but himself and Alison, also dead. Don would come out and demand to know …

"What the hell happened in here?!"

Jonathan wished he could dive into his shoes and scurry away. Instead he stepped into the light. The bedroom was sparkling with blood and gore. Bloody footprints were tracked all over the floor, Jonathan's footprints, and the coach's too, but that could be explained because the coach was a big man and doubtless put up a huge fight after Pac-Man bit the dust under Jonathan's flashing knife, now a strange bleeding adornment to Cooper's chest.

Don looked at Jonathan with tired, speculative eyes. Almost sadly, he pulled his pistol out. "I have to take you in, son," he said.

Jonathan hung his head until his chin was resting on his chest. "Don, please don't."

Don looked past him without replying. A three-man squadron of cops was tromping down the hallway, ruining all hope for the light fixture under their heavy feet. They pushed past Jonathan and gasped at the carnage.

"Please don't," Jonathan said again.

Don stared at him grimly. "I called for backup when I heard the commotion. What did you expect? A cleaning service to wipe up the mess you made?"

He pointed to one of the cops. "You read him his rights. I don't want this botched on a damn *Miranda* technicality." He sagged wearily onto the bed, studying his shoes as if looking for a fault in the shiny black polish. Jonathan had polished his shoes for him when he was a kid, made them really sparkle for his dad, but now Dad's shoes were flecked with blood, the soles of them painted with it, all because of little Jonny and his lunacy. The cop began to chant his rights, reading them from a well-worn card. The other two were busy trying to pull the knife out of Cooper's chest without ruining the prints.

The light went off.

"Good grief," Don bleated. "Jonathan, do you have a lamp someplace?"

"Yeah. Other side of the bed. It's plugged in."

He heard Don get up and fumble with it. The light clicked on at the same moment that a flash of blue sparks geysered upward from the shade. Don jerked back, flapping his hand. “What’s with the electricity in this place?” he asked angrily. “Your landlord ought to be shot.”

He stumbled back around the bed, weaving slightly, looking dazed. He sat down again, no longer concerned about his shoes, worried more about his blackened finger. After the rights had been read, he started speaking abruptly. “I’ll get you the best lawyer I can, Jonathan. Frankly, you’re in very deep shit.”

He turned to the cops wrestling with the knife. “Put him in my car. I’ll book him myself. Get another unit out here to cordon the place, and call the coroner. He’s going to love this one.”

They straightened and took Jonathan by the elbows, obviously glad to be rid of the knife-in-the-corpse job. They hauled him out.

Don looked at the remaining cop, shaking his head. “You sure as shit can’t tell a book by its cover, huh?”

The cop nodded as he pocketed his *Miranda* card.

“Just can’t tell,” Don muttered. “Never can.”

Chapter • Twelve

Jonathan had been in Don's car nearly half an hour before Don came out. Jonathan was sitting slumped in the back seat of the unmarked car, his mind too full of worries and his stomach strangely insisting that something be put in it. He realized that he had not eaten all day; he told his stomach to just shut up. Worse things were going on than slow starvation now. Now we are facing the electric chair, just like Pinker …

… *Daddy?* …

… *you little brat you shot me in the knee!* …

… just like that stranger Pinker had.

His yard was ablaze with strobing police lights in pretty colors, the squawk of police radios, cameras flashing. The Channel 8 ActionCam was in action, panning the scene with a light as bright as a searchlight while Walker Stevens heaved his guts up in the darkness beside the house. Some neighbors had wandered over, some in pajamas, some clutching robes together, held at bay by the fat yellow tape that enclosed the lawn outside the fence and declared this to be a Crime Scene, Do Not Cross. Jonathan sunk lower in the seat, leaving only his eyes and hair for gawkers to enjoy. He saw Don come out finally, barking orders to the dozen or so cops milling about, jabbing a finger here and there, acting very military.

The coroner had already finished his business of loading the bloody corpses of Cooper and Pac-Man into his stern white van. There was some commotion in the backyard; soon another stretcher was carted around the house. A minute later the corpse of the fat road worker was brought to the white van. Some of his body had collapsed into itself like cold ashes; the stretcher bearers weren't laboring at all. Jonathan wondered how they would try to pin *this* on him. The worker had been incinerated from within. They would find no solid cause of death; for whatever good that would do.

Don, seeming satisfied, started toward his car. Jonathan watched him come, his father who had supported him these many years, taught him good from bad, naughty from nice. Dear foster father Don Parker was coming to haul his foster son off to jail, and somewhere along the line he must have injured his knee, because he was dragging his left foot as if it were so much dead meat.

Jonathan sat up straighter with his heart suddenly booming in the

far hollows of his chest, making his ears pound. Don was ducking under the yellow tape, difficult to do with his new bum leg. He was straightening, barely five yards from the car now. Jonathan tried to batter the door open, but it was a cop door, no handle, no window that would roll down. He slid across the seat and smashed his elbow against the other door, getting only a sore elbow for his trouble. He tried screaming, but it was muffled and if anybody heard it, they weren't saying.

Jonathan looked frantically back to Don. Don cast him a sweet, sickening smile, then adjusted his face again, sober and in charge. He limped forward, reaching in his pocket for the keys.

Jonathan hurled himself at the wire mesh that kept him from the front seat, rattling it as uselessly as a monkey in a cage. He tried pounding on the roof, wild with desperation, hoping someone would hear. But what good would it do? He was a felon, a murderer, a copycat killer not very good at copying. No one here would give him help, give him anything at all except maybe the finger if he was feeling particularly nasty.

Don was reaching for the door handle, his keys dangling from one finger. He cracked the door open, letting in a surge of noise and mayhem. He started to get in, lifting his bad leg with his hands. Jonathan shouted, but no one was in the mood to hear. He screamed hard enough to snap a vocal cord.

Pinker got in, plopping heavily on the seat. He turned to Jonathan, his face carrying a familiar and wicked grin.

"Lungs or heart, Jonny-boy. Which one should I rip out first?"

Jonathan hammered on the rear window, trying impossibly to break it. Pinker laughed, his voice changing from Don's to his own, a mad, cackling combination of deep thunder and pig squeal. Jonathan hammered the window uselessly while Pinker laughed.

One of the uniformed policemen in the yard shouted before Pinker could shut the door. He made his face placid again and stepped out, leaving his bad leg inside. "What now?" he grunted, Lieutenant Don Parker once more.

"We've found Cooper's van," the cop shouted. "Abandoned less than a block from here, dead in the center of Maplegrove Street." He was holding a bulky walkie-talkie in one hand. He listened to it briefly, pressing it to his ear. "Might be some blood on the steering wheel. The keys are still in it. We're going to have to cordon it off or else move it."

"Well, shit," Pinker snapped, and got back out, slamming the door hard enough to rattle the car. Jonathan went back to ruining his knuckles on reinforced glass, maybe even bulletproof as far as he

knew.

Turns out it wasn't.

A huge fist smashed through the window on the passenger's side, nearly catching Jonathan on the chin. The fist opened, grabbed his shirt, and yanked him out. His swift passage involved demolishing the rest of the window, which Jonathan did with less good grace than was common, thinking somehow that Pinker had jumped to a new body and was about to perform the final act in his dismal play.

But it wasn't Pinker. It was Rhino. Rhino, the big lummox not famed for following orders. He pulled Jonathan to his feet. "Explain later! Get the hell out!"

Jonathan didn't need to think twice. He left almost fast enough to scorch the soles of his Reeboks on the street. In five seconds the night was ready to cloak him in darkness.

Pinker looked over at the noise. His face drew tight in a horrible, vulpine grimace. He yanked his pistol out and, to the endless surprise of his fellow officers, the coroner, the nosy neighbors, and the reporter whose wig was on backward, began firing wildly at Jonathan's receding shadow. Everybody hit the deck in unison while uncountable bullets whistled overhead in rapid and noisy succession. Everybody but Rhino, who was charging through the yellow warning tape. He smashed into Pinker, knocking him ten feet across the yard. Pinker rolled once and was up again, pointing the smoking barrel of the Browning directly at Rhino's ample nose. He pulled the trigger.

Sixteen brass bullet casings were already heaped in a pile three feet beside him. The gun clicked.

Pinker whirled around, enraged, nearly frothing at the mouth. "Kill him!" he screamed. "Kill the jerk! *Kill the jerk!"*

The cops on the ground stared at him with their mouths hanging open. Nobody moved.

"SHITHEADS!!!" he screeched, flapping his arms. *"KILL HIM! KILL HIM!"*

He huffed and puffed, getting nowhere. He pulled a fresh clip out of a back pocket but wasn't able to jam it in, both because it was upside down and backward, and because the empty clip was still in place. He bellowed curses to the sky for a bit, then ran for the car with one foot bumbling along behind him. Everybody watched him peel out in a screeching spray of tire smoke and gravel. By the time his taillights had vanished a good distance away they were on their feet again, wondering just why Don Parker's voice had so suddenly changed from that of a calm and placid professional to the screeching howl of a maniac.

Jonathan did not stop running until he was on Makley Street, the old business sector of Maryville that had pretty well died when the new shopping malls went up on the southern outskirts of town. Here ruined buildings sat gaping at the world with black and windowless eyes, the skeletal remains of never-used fire escapes adorning the brick walls along with two decades' worth of graffiti. Bums could be found here lounging in the gutters, tasting those rotten-grape taste-teasers that went for a buck a bottle. These were the highest buildings in Maryville, the trashiest, the darkest. No one came here except the bums, the hopeless, the unwanted. Jonathan almost felt at home here. His was a lost cause.

His pace had slowed to an exhausted trot. His arms dangled at his sides. He occasionally missed a step because one of Pinker's borrowed bullets had skimmed the inside of his left knee. The irony of his was not lost on him; now both the chased and the chaser had a bum leg.

Like father, like son?

Jonathan shrugged that thought away as he ducked tiredly into a dark alley, ran a bit, gave up and sagged against a wall to catch his breath. Sweat had pasted his pants and shirt to his body like a squishy second skin. More sweat was irrigating his face, washing it clean of blood, splashing big drops on the pavement. The drops might be an easy trail to follow, as good as bread crumbs anyway, but right now he did not care all that much. His abused body was about ready to call it quits for the night and dump him in the gutter with the other derelicts. He estimated he had run nearly four miles by now, the world's toughest training regimen. His muscles were quivering as if vibrated from within, stretched to the limit, too weak to move. His shoulder put out a bone-deep ache that flared all the way up his neck and stopped at the crown of his head, where the goose egg was. All three wounds hammered in ragged unison.

A trace of breeze chased debris down the narrow alley, carrying the smell of garbage. He hooked an arm into the rusted ladder of a fire escape, welcoming the wind, and surveyed his chances. He couldn't go back home. Ever. He couldn't check into a motel because he was broke. He couldn't go to Don's house because Don was done being Don and had become Pinker. Pac-Man had a place, but Pac-Man was preoccupied with being dead. The coach's place was out, too. He had been divorced for years and lived alone, but the cops might be haunting his house to see what they could scare up.

He chuckled miserably. Haunting his house. See what they could scare up. Har-de-har.

That left Rhino's apartment, a good eight miles from here. Hitchhike there? Get real. Nobody hitchhikes in the city. Taxi? No dough. Sleep

at the college? Locked by now. Steal a car? What, and go to jail?

Pinker ended his dilemma by suddenly turning into the other end of the alley, headlights blazing, siren rising from nothing to a scream. The tires screeched as Pinker laid on the gas, barreling straight for Jonathan. The big police-custom Chrysler barely fit; at times Pinker shaved paint and metal off the sides with shattering explosions of orange sparks. Jonathan gaped at it, blinded by the light, thinking dully that he should move before the car and the rough brick wall made hamburger out of him.

Groaning, he pulled himself hand over hand up the ladder, which creaked and muttered against its rotted moorings, threatening to collapse. Pinker's car howled past just as Jonathan pulled his feet out of the way, the Chrysler sucking a scatter of trash and old leaves behind it. Pinker sent the car into a tire-smoking spin, knocking the tail hard against a dead streetlight. The motor roared insanely, and he was charging forward again. In the backglow of the headlights Jonathan could see him, barely recognizable now as Don Parker at all, a grinning white moon for a face, a specter with wildly tattered hair and eyes slitted down blankly.

Almost out of energy, drenched with sweat, Jonathan hauled himself up the last rung to the fire escape proper, where rust-eaten steps zigzagged upward to blackness. He paused to look down; Pinker had brought the Chrysler to a tire-cooking halt by the ladder and was trying to open his door. It gave only a few inches before thudding into the opposite wall. He howled and threw the car into reverse. The open door caught in the bricks and, with a crunching groan, buckled and folded. The rear tires shot hot tornadoes of smoke, spinning in a blur while Pinker screamed at God and the world and Jonathan Parker.

The door gave up the ghost with a metallic crunch. The car shot backward. It crashed into the same dead streetlight, which gave up and toppled over sideways, spraying streetlight glass to both curbs. Pinker hopped out. He fiddled with the pistol while Jonathan crawled up the steps on all fours. He fired, and sparks jumped off the wall beside Jonathan's head. He fired again in a frenzy, chewing holes in the dirty brick and making bright-metal streaks through the rust of the steps. Jonathan scrambled faster, ducking and dodging an enemy he could not see.

Pinker dashed to the ladder and began hoisting himself up, moving fast for a man with a dead knee. The pistol was clamped between his teeth, dead center in the middle of his snarl. He came to the landing, reloaded, and began shooting upward. The stairway rang like a large tuning fork while sparks jumped off the steel. Jonathan imagined the agony of being shot through the bottom of his foot. That would end

this little race fast. But he was nearing the rooftop, and Pinker was reloading again as he took the steps two at a time.

Jonathan rolled himself over the lip of the flat tar roof, got to his feet at a speed that would win him no trophies, and struggled gamely on. Rainwater had collected in places on the sagging roof, and he splashed through these while noticing that he had nowhere left to go. This was not good news. Pinker knew it, too.

“Dead end, asshole!” Pinker shouted as he pulled himself up to the roof.

Jonathan looked around in desperation. The roof was about the size of a tennis court, but there was nowhere to go. Dead end, cul-de-sac, end of the road. Finished and finis. He turned and shouted. “Dad! Fight him! Use your will!”

Dad wasn’t in an accommodating mood tonight. He laughed and began popping off more shots from his seemingly endless supply of ammunition. Jonathan ducked behind a squat sheet-metal ventilator of some sort, some ancient thing that was putting out the aroma of rot and decay from the bowels of the building. Jonathan grimaced at the smell. Obviously a wino or two had croaked here. What an undignified place to die, both for the winos and himself.

A bullet punched easily through the aged sheet metal, making a large pencil hole beside Jonathan’s face. This was not good. He knew he might as well have hidden behind a pile of feathers. He looked around while Pinker drew closer and his fear threatened to close in on him like a shroud.

There was another building behind him. It was fully two stories taller than this one. A single ladder climbed its wall. On the roof there was an Erector Set construction, a miniature Eiffel Tower topped with a large dish antenna. One baleful red light near the top winked on and off to scare the airplanes away.

The jump was easily ten feet, hard to do on the ground, harder yet up here in the sky. Jonathan let his overloaded mind debate the issue while Pinker came inexorably on, dragging his foot like Boris Karloff as the Mummy, only moving three times as fast. He punctuated his uneven footfalls with periodic pistol shots. The ventilator sprouted more holes.

Jonathan’s mind handed him the decision: go for it. He did. He sprang up and barreled straight for the far lip of the roof, aiming himself at the ladder so far, far away. Adrenaline put him back into top form momentarily, but would, as usual, take its toll later. His feet found the edge. He catapulted himself off, arms and legs spread wide like the limbs of an oversized flying squirrel, watching the ladder come closer, knowing that bullets were hissing past his ears, knowing

that the rungs of the ladder were blurring upward, which meant he was falling.

He smashed onto the ladder, hurting everything at once. His hands reached up to grab at the rungs, but they slipped past his fingers with a sound like an old-fashioned washboard being scrubbed. His forward momentum was gone, no longer needed, but gravity was obeying its own law, and he was falling.

He took the outer bars of the ladder in a bear hug, hooking his feet around them like a man determined to climb a greased pole. Rungs thunked against his chin and heels. His eyes were squeezed shut. Friction burned his hands and turned his Reeboks into smoking torches. He slowed. And stopped. And thanked the god of lost causes for another reprieve.

He climbed. This ladder was not rusted very badly; apparently it was still used by whoever owned the antenna, who knew and who cared? He climbed as fast as his overtaxed body would allow, realizing he had been in free-fall for nearly two stories, a tale his burned hands would tell for the next four days.

Pinker screamed obscenities above him, firing down into darkness at a target he could no longer see, Pinker a small and raging shadow under the light of the moon. It came to Jonathan that he should just stay here, wait Pinker out, hang on to this ladder for dear life until he went away. The idea had a certain attraction to it. Only, Pinker would never go away. If Jonathan stayed, he would go down that building and come up this one. If Jonathan went up, Pinker would have to face the ten-foot plunge. He was the World's Most Determined Man, but if Pinker died, Don would die. If Don's body fused from the strain and became a useless husk, Pinker would simply find someone else. He always did. So Jonathan climbed toward the top and the telling moonlight, his mind full of ifs, somehow hoping to run the energy out of Don while keeping him alive.

He was about to enter the upper zone where darkness ended and moonlight began, wary and full of a creeping sort of terror, when he noticed that Pinker was gone. He looked around, not surprised. Not being able to see him, Pinker had opted for a trip down the fire escape and a chance to kill Jonathan from below. That was fine. Pretty soon Jonathan would be on the roof of this higher building, and Pinker could peddle his wares to death somewhere else.

He was twelve rungs into the light when a bright, piercing scream shot through the chasm between the first building and the second. Jonathan stopped, glancing over his shoulder. Nothing was unusual except the strange scream; nothing was amiss. He thought he saw a ghost of a shadow falling to the street at the edges of his vision, but it

might have been a bit of trash, a leaf. He climbed, glad that Pinker had made the wrong decision.

He was almost at the top, ready to scramble onto the roof of this stunted mid-America skyscraper, when the ladder jerked as if hit by a wrecking ball. Jonathan stopped, hanging on tight, new fear blooming in his brain. Pinker was on the ladder below, impossibly on the ladder below. No wrecking ball, then: one plummeting Pinker catching the ladder by sheer force of will. It was a miracle that their combined weight did not pull the ladder from the wall.

Jonathan was still looking down when an orange blossom flashed into existence below. It was followed by the loud ping of a bullet hitting the ladder. Jonathan felt like throwing himself into the abyss and ending this whole impossible survival scene. He had youth on his side, and little else. Pinker had the demons of hell backing him up.

He came to the end of the ladder. The red light above the small-scale Eiffel Tower flashed red, off, red, off. Beacon to air travelers. Beacon to the bums and derelicts of Maryville. Here you have a safe haven, it seemed to signal, but only if you are willing to pay the price.

Jonathan was. He stood on the top rung of the ladder, for a moment almost losing balance, and then he was clawing his way onto the roof.

It was not much different from the other one, save for the tower thrusting up near the left edge. There were shallow puddles of stagnant rainwater pooled wherever a depression in the old and buckling tar had formed; the roof itself was two times the size of a tennis court, big brother to the previous one. Jonathan ran to the opposite edge as Pinker clanged up the ladder. Jonathan's burned Reeboks slipped in a huge puddle and he felt himself skidding to the edge. He dropped down on his butt and cut creases in the tar with his fingernails, sliding to a stop. One foot dropped over. Jonathan took a wondering breath, amazed that a young man named Jonathan Parker could be doing this wild and ridiculous thing, sliding around on a twelve-story building like an amateur ice skater. He scooted back and got to his feet.

Pinker had risen from the ladder and was wrestling himself onto the roof. His breath pumped up and down as fast as a panting dog's. His clothes were mottled with giant spots of sweat. The gleam in his eyes would barely pass for a burned-out penlight. But he could still shoot, and shout.

"You son of a bitch! Die! Die, you rotten little—"

He aimed the gun with spent and shaking hands. He grimaced as he pulled the trigger, his eyes lighting up a bit in anticipation of the kill. His face became a sudden mask of bewilderment.

The gun did not fire. Instead it dropped to the tar of the roof with a

thump. Pinker slammed both hands against his chest, near the center. “Ooog,” he said quite distinctly.

Jonathan felt a twinge of relief. The chase had exhausted Don and his unwanted guest. Jonathan walked toward him.

“Don? Are you back, Don?”

Pinker’s grotesque leer came back to the face that had been twisted with pain. He lunged at Jonathan, botching it only at the last moment when Jonathan sidestepped him as neatly as you please. Jonathan thanked the gods once again for the years he had spent in training, surveyed his options briefly, and knew what he had to do.

Keep climbing. Pinker was almost spent.

And by the by, a snickering inner voice suggested, *so are you!*

Jonathan ran for the tower, which now seemed to loom upward fifty feet against the sky and the fat half-moon that peered down without caring. He jumped for all he was worth, and his questing fingers found cold steel.

He willed his hands and feet to do him one more favor before signing off the air. He willed them to carry him upward where there was no sureness of escape, no sureness of an end to this. He simply asked them to do their best.

They did. He saw the ghostly outlines of his hands as they grabbed one steel bar after another, pulling him up. His feet were doing things he had no awareness of. His legs had become an entity of their own, driving him up and up to a destiny that might well stink worse than the current one did.

Pinker worked his way up, too. Without his big pistol he was no more menacing than a white shark. Jonathan climbed faster. So did Pinker.

Someone shouted from below. Both Jonathan and Pinker peered down, dumb with wonder.

“What’s with you idiots?”

Pinker growled. It was only a security guard coming up the ladder onto the rooftop, a rare thing in this screwball part of town. Maybe his only task in life was to aim the antenna dish at the nearest satellite every two or three hours. Maybe his only task in life was to die right here. None of it mattered to either Jonathan or Pinker. One life had no importance anymore when weighed against the fifty that had gone before.

The guard shouted again as Jonathan resumed climbing. “Hey! If you get in front of that dish you’ll be fried alive! It bounces fifty thousand volts of microwave television transmission from God knows where! It’s a giant microwave oven!”

Jonathan stopped and shouted down to him. “Shut it off and call for help!”

The guard emitted a nervous little laugh. “Are you kidding? Shut off the basketball game? About a zillion people will be out to fry your ass. If the dish doesn’t fry it first, that is. Ha-ha.”

Yeah, ha-ha, Jonathan thought as Pinker reached out to grab his foot. He jerked it away and went back to climbing. The red light affixed to the tower, the one that had seemed so tiny from far away, was a gigantic beacon about the size of a tire. It shone off and on in a steady beat. Jonathan had to keep his eyes closed as he passed it, and still he saw brutal red flashes behind his eyelids. He bonked his head on something, some kind of wobbly steel, and opened his eyes. He was amazed to see a catwalk above the dish, one final place to stand and fight and die, a thick wire mesh that went around the top of the tower in a semicircle above the antenna. No doubt for the convenience of the dish-aimer, since falling fifty feet to a tar roof was nobody’s idea of fun, and aiming any kind of dish (especially one twenty feet in diameter) was not work to be performed without having firm footing.

The stairs angled up and backward, leaving Jonathan clinging to the handrails like an acrobat while all of Maryville snoozed peacefully below, down where the sparkling city lights ran in even squares and nothing was wrong. His feet, still damp, slipped, and for a second he was hanging on to the ladder’s sides with his feet pedaling the blackness of the air. Pinker was grunting along like a pig below, snorting his victory to this limited audience.

Jonathan found his footing again. The three steps up with his back nearly parallel to the roof were more exhilarating than anything an amusement park had to offer. He dragged himself up to the catwalk and scooted across its unforgiving cold mesh, mentally giving up acrobatics for life, as well as football, basketball (in which he was notoriously lousy), and walking. Things were just getting too dangerous these days.

Pinker was panting, a worn-out steam engine signaling overload with every tortured breath. Jonathan got himself on his feet and walked to the far side of the catwalk. The microwave dish was humming below his feet like a nestful of wasps. Jonathan walked the slim circumference of the catwalk, his heart thumping, his breath screeching in his lungs. He wiped his forehead with his hand and flipped the drops away. They fell in front of the dish, dancing in free-fall and popping as they cooked in the unseen heat. Jonathan jerked back, realizing now that he could hear the voice of the basketball announcer as it was beamed on fifty thousand volts, crackling and nearly unrecognizable in the invisible stream of microwaves. He

squatted and lowered a hand to the dish, feeling it. Hot, humming. Hot enough, maybe, to cook Pinker out of Don's body without killing him.

Pinker came up. He grappled his way up onto the catwalk. Sweat was shining on his face, looking blood red under the flashing beacon. He was jittering and shaking with fatigue.

They played a slow and exhausting round of catch-me-if-you-can, circling around on the narrow catwalk, Pinker lunging again and again while Jonathan danced away. One time Jonathan felt his heels slip over the edge of the slick mesh floor, and for an excruciating moment believed it was all over, that his madly pinwheeling arms were doing nothing at all for his balance. But then it was there again, and he nearly fell forward. The absurdity of this situation struck him, but there was no humor in it. Here he was on top of a twelve-story building, performing the dance of death on a catwalk the size of a child's swimming pool, fifty feet up on a television tower. Sometimes life is just plain strange.

Pinker clutched his chest again, his leering face shifting suddenly into a huge frown. He seemed extraordinarily baffled. He gurgled something and fell to his knees.

Jonathan stopped, nearly ready to collapse along with Pinker. Only … now he didn't seem to be Pinker anymore. His face was twisted up with pain. He looked at Jonathan with eyes that no longer glowed, eyes that registered pain and a curious brand of remorse. His mouth fell open and he spoke: "Oh my God. Jonathan—my heart!"

Jonathan stepped toward him, too familiar with Pinker's tricks. "Dad? Is that really you?"

He nodded once, doubling over with pain. "Oh, Jesus," he groaned. "What's happening?"

Jonathan stayed back while the breeze gusted hard and cool against his face, tattering his soaking hair. He wondered if this was the real thing, this newest trick. To his knowledge Don had never had heart trouble.

Don (Pinker?) fell forward on his face and rolled to the rim of the catwalk. Jonathan took another step, wild with uncertainty, wanting to help but not wanting to die in the process.

Don rolled again. He plunged out of sight, soundless. A moment later the tower swayed back and forth as if hit by a huge invisible hammer. Jonathan went down on his stomach, nearly petrified with shock, and looked down at the huge antenna dish. His breath caught in his throat.

Don had managed to grab hold of the top of the dish. The ghostly announcer shouted something about Wildcats smashing Detroit.

Jonathan reached down for his hand, able to scrape it with his fingernails. He smelled burning hair then, and realized with a burst of horror that Don was hanging in front of the dish, his body engulfed in microwaves. Don wrenched his mouth open and screamed, eyes squinched shut, his whole body twisting and flopping as the invisible rays soaked through him. He opened his mouth again, and this time it was the thin, reedy voice of the basketball announcer snapping and sizzling out of his mouth, trailed by a puff of smoke. Don seemed to glow a hellish, unnatural green.

Jonathan scooted forward, reaching down again. He snagged Don's hand and tried to hoist him back up to the safety of the catwalk. Don seemed to be having convulsions, his knees jerking up, his mouth hanging open while foul-smelling smoke blew out. Jonathan knew Don had only seconds to live, and pulled with all the strength he could find.

Smoke boiled out of Don's chest then, a familiar spurt of orange and black gas that twisted itself into something recognizable, something hideous.

Pinker.

"Okay, asshole," Pinker snarled at him, floating in the black night, a glowing specter made of light and noise and hate. "I'm going nationwide now."

He began to disintegrate, molecule by molecule, flowing into the jet stream of electrons, his face twisting up with that awful, self-satisfied leer, the one he had worn in Jonathan's house when he joined the wiring and turned the place into a house of horrors.

There was a bright, brittle snap, and Pinker was gone, a blue streak shooting across the night sky that slowly faded to nothing.

Jonathan pulled Don up, dragging him onto the catwalk with energy he no longer had. Then he collapsed beside him, panting, imagining that this must be what death was like.

Don mumbled something. Jonathan pushed himself up on one shaking elbow, looking into Don's pain-weary eyes. "What?"

"I'm sorry," Don gasped. "I didn't know how to get him out of me."

"But you did it," Jonathan said. "I never even knew you had a bad heart."

Don smiled weakly. "I don't. You know that, I know that—but Pinker didn't."

Jonathan smiled back. Below them, the sound of sirens drifted up. Help was on the way.

Chapter • Thirteen

Seven days later, ace reporter Walker Stevens was on the scene of yet another crime. The camera was on, the sound man had given the thumbs-up, and it was just about time to Interrupt This Broadcast with yet another news special on Channel 8, WPIN. The news was far from good. The cops nosing around looking for clues would find only a big portion of Walker Stevens's supper somewhere near the house. Walker himself was not in very good shape, despite the customary visit to the hedges; this murder stuff was getting too damned bizarre. The whole family was of course dead, mangled, dismembered, guts and blood tossed around the living room like so much wet confetti. This time there had been a message written in smeary blood on one wall, giant letters that looked as if a very large and industrious kindergarten kid had used red fingerpaints by the gallon.

None of this was especially more gruesome than the other murders, but one thing had stuck in Walker's craw, and threatened to stay there permanently.

The killer had also slaughtered the family pets this time. A dog, couple of cats, a hamster. Even the goldfish were dead, and as one cop remarked, the water was still too hot to touch.

How in the hell do you boil goldfish in an aquarium? How the hell do you report these crimes again and again without losing your mind? Maryville was in the grip of a super-duper mass murderer, and as always this little tidbit of information would come to the people via Walker Stevens, always Walker Stevens. Lately people had taken to calling him names on the street. Nobody wanted to hear this shit anymore. That Jonathan Parker kid had been caught almost in the act. But now, this fresh atrocity, and you could bet your ass the kid had an alibi.

So who was doing it?

"Go on cue," the sound man said. "Ready?"

Walker swallowed. There seemed to be yet a bit of supper lodged in his plumbing somewhere. God help his career if he upchucked on live TV.

The sound man raised a finger. "Three, two, one. You're on."

"Hello, Maryville. This is Walker Stevens reporting live from 1415 Margaret Street, where yet another mass killing has been discovered.

With the arrest of young Jonathan Parker last week, increasingly implicated in the murders following the electrocution of Horace Pinker, the horror seemed to be over."

Behind him the coroner's people began carting sheet-draped bodies out of the house. The cameraman swung around to follow the action, giving Walker a reprieve. After they'd been loaded, the camera swung back.

"But last night an apparent copycat murderer struck Maryville, killing an entire family and leaving an obscenely grisly threat to Jonathan Parker scrawled on the wall, signing the name 'Pinker.' Police are further baffled because there was no sign of forced entry. It seems apparent that the family was awake and watching television when the killer struck."

A cop came out dragging the carcass of the dog, good old Rover or Fido or whatever, onto the porch and down the steps. Doggie's head thumped on the wooden steps. Walker's stomach gave a lurch.

"Meanwhile, Jonathan Parker has been released by authorities following the testimony of his father, police Lieutenant Donald Parker, who, although suffering from severe microwave burns, was able to give testimony that his son, Jonathan, was not only innocent but had saved his life."

Another cop came out. He was holding two mangled, dripping cats by their tails. He tossed them in the trunk of his cruiser. Walker's plumbing began to rumble.

"Indeed, police lab reports confirm that the deaths of football coach Sydney Cooper and student assistant coach Roy 'Pac-Man' Stuart now appear to be the result of a murder-suicide. Incredibly, Sydney Cooper is the prime suspect in those deaths, since it was his fingerprints alone found on the murder weapon. We'll have more details tonight at ten."

The cop slammed his trunk and went inside. A few seconds later he came back out, staggering under the weight of a large rectangular aquarium. He dumped it out on the lawn, cursing at himself and the still-hot aquarium. Boiled fish sluiced across the grass. One slid up to nudge Walker's left wing tip. One dead and boiled eye stared up at him. He looked down at it while his insides roiled.

"Now, back to our regularly scheduled program, still in progress."

He threw his mike at the sound man. He gave the camera a wave to make it go away. He tossed his remaining cookies on the fish.

Just another day in the life of Walker Stevens, daring reporter.

Jonathan shut the TV off and surveyed the men in his apartment, looking grim and haunted. In front of him half the university football

team was assembled, volunteers for an ugly job. They stared back at him, waiting for directions.

"Coach didn't do it, guys," Jonathan said. "Neither did Pac-Man. I want you to know that."

He turned to Rhino, who had decided this was a good time to pick his fingernails and was doing it studiously, almost cross-eyed with concentration. "Are you up to this?" Jonathan asked him.

Rhino let his hands fall. "We're friends, aren't we?"

Jonathan nodded. "You bet."

Rhino swept a hand, indicating the others. "And we're all a team, right?"

They nodded agreement, seeming none too happy about it. Most of them wore faces indicating doubt. Rhino ignored it. "So we'll do what you asked us to, Jon. It's a federal offense, incidentally, and technically almost impossible." He grinned. "But hell, we're the Warriors, right? We eat that kind of stuff for breakfast!"

He got a few half-hearted "yeahs." Jonathan looked at his watch, knowing Rhino would knock heads together if they tried to back out. "Exactly at midnight," he said. "It'll just give me time."

"You got it." Rhino hesitated, frowning. "May I ask *why* we're doing this?"

"No."

Rhino raised his hands. "No problem! We'll do it anyway! Right, men?"

A few shrugged. The rest studied their shoes with sudden interest.

"Right???" Rhino bellowed.

They stood up with uncomfortable smiles pasted to their faces. Rhino led them out, still barking siss-boom-bahs and other related cheery stuff. When they were gone Jonathan crossed the room and picked up the telephone. Distant thunder boomed outside, promising foul weather.

He dialed WPIN, Maryville's only television station. A lady answered. "Helloooo?"

"This is Jonathan Parker, ma'am. I have an exclusive story for you concerning the murders last night."

"Hold, pleeeease," she said, and the phone was full of happy Muzak. Jonathan waited, nervously tapping his foot. The phone clicked and someone else said hello. He shunted Jonathan off to someone else. It went on and on, eventually leading him to a remote phone in somebody's car. A guy got on who said he might be interested. Jonathan told as much as he dared. He thought he recognized the voice, and he was right.

Walker Stevens, eating Rolaids by the handful. Who else?

Jonathan arrived at the Parker house—the house where he had lived from the age of seven until he started college, the house where his foster mother, Diane, had lived before Pinker butchered her—at dusk and went inside with a mixture of dread and nostalgia churning through his mind. In his hand he carried the diving mask that had cost Pac-Man and the coach their lives, a simple Undersea Sports affair that he had had since junior high school. He clicked the light on and let the old memories flood over him: over there he had fallen down the stairs more times than he could count; over there was the pottery ashtray he had made for Diane in art class when he was thirteen. Everything was the same, but it was all different. Every sign of the carnage that had occurred here last year had been scrubbed away. The carpet was new: little Bobby's blood had hung on too stubbornly in the old one, Don had told him. Upstairs, where Diane and the new girl, Sally, had been killed, the room was probably spotless. It was there that Jonathan needed to go; it was there where he had seen Pinker for the first time.

He left the front door open for the reporter and the camera crew, who were due any moment, and went slowly up the stairs with the hairs on the back of his neck rising up in unconscious response to the memories that attacked him here. The ghost of Pinker hung over everything, a dismal shroud of death and hate. Jonathan came to the top of the stairway and was hit by the memory of the dream, the dream in which he attacked Pinker for the first time and woke up in his own bed, drenched in sweat, while Alison hovered over him asking what was wrong. Nightmares never come true, they say, but for Jonathan everything had come true, all too true.

He walked to the door and turned the knob. It came open with a faint creak, as if the room had been unused for the past year, which was probably the case. The little girl's bed was in here, nicely made up. There beside it was where Diane and the girl were knifed to death; no sign of that now. Yet the room was too quiet, too full of restless ghosts and haunted memories. Jonathan went back downstairs, feeling vaguely ill.

He was sitting at the foot of the steps when the Channel 8 people arrived. Walker Stevens rapped on the open door and stuck his head inside. His familiar wig was neatly combed into his real hair, looking almost convincing. He put on a phony little smile and came in. A young guy carrying a big square suitcase followed, grunting from the weight of it and the folded tripod he had dangling from one shoulder on a strap. One more man came in, a nondescript fellow lugging more

equipment. They dumped it all on the floor and headed outside for another load, leaving Walker and Jonathan alone.

"Now let me get this straight, Mr. Parker," Walker said. "Can I call you Jonathan? Great. Now, you want us to go on live, at five minutes to midnight, right? And if we do, you guarantee to produce the person who did the copycat killing last night?"

Jonathan nodded. "Upstairs to the left. Room on the right. You'll have to set things up in the bedroom."

"Eh?" Walker raised an eyebrow, not looking very happy about things. "Why's that?"

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "You'd make a good reporter. Did you kill that coach and his helper? Just between you and me. Man to man."

Jonathan rolled his eyes slightly. Dork. "No, and if you'll get things set up, I'll show you who did. I'll show you the man who did it all."

Walker sighed. "If you make a fool out of me on live television …"

You don't need any help, Jonathan thought, but said: "I'm going to make you so hot you'll be anchoring network prime-time news before you know it. CBS will kill for you. All the others, too. Even CNN. Deal?"

Walker nodded. His troops marched back in lugging more stuff. They looked soggy and dispirited, even more so when Walker told them to go upstairs. They did, muttering.

"Okay," Jonathan said, and raised his diving mask. "I'll see you later."

"Hey!" Walker snapped as Jonathan headed for the door. "There's no way I can justify the time and money if you walk out for a casual swim. Guys! Pack up!"

Jonathan turned. "Hold on there. I'm going out to find the killer. I'll bring him here. Just have a camera feeding your station at five to midnight."

"Why should I? This is preposterous."

"Fine," Jonathan said. "Let the other networks get the story first. I don't really care that much."

The cameraman tromped back downstairs. "Well? Do we stay or not?"

"Stay, I guess," Walker growled. "I've got a feeling this kid means business."

Jonathan went out, satisfied to hear the rattle and clatter of machinery being set up. He aimed himself at the park, walking fast but not running, anxious to get there but needing to save his energy

for the fireworks tonight. The estimable Mr. Stevens had no idea what a show would be put on around midnight. Trouble was, neither did Jonathan. Not for sure.

It took him nearly twenty minutes to get to the outskirts of the park, another ten to walk to the lake. The sky churned overhead, thick clouds the color of ashes. The park was deserted in preparation for the rainstorm about to happen; Jonathan could smell it in the air. The lake was shrouded in drifting mists.

Jonathan put on the diving mask and waded into the water, still fully clothed, still not working very hard. When it got deep enough he began to swim at a leisurely pace. He felt he had time to spare.

Or no time at all.

At that moment a university athletic department van jammed with people drove up to the hurricane fence that surrounded the Maryville Light and Power Company's main station. It was here that electricity from the northern Ohio generating plant near Cleveland piped uncountable millions of volts into the Maryville station every day. It was here that Rhino brought his team, as instructed. They piled out of the van and stood around in the growing wind, hands shoved deep inside jacket pockets, shoulders hunched, nobody cheerful at all despite Rhino's cheerleading.

He got out and stared at the sky. Rain coming, and soon. It was almost too dark to see. He walked around to the back of the van, leaned inside, and found the rubber gloves, crowbar, and wire cutters he had borrowed from his dad's toolbox. He eased the double doors shut and looked at the others.

"Everybody ready?"

Someone grumbled, hard to tell who in the dark. "Why do you need all of us, Rhino? All you have to do is cut a hole in the fence."

Rhino held his temper. "It is because I need you guys to patrol the perimeter while me and Bruno go inside. I don't want to get caught screwing with all this stuff." He indicated the huge transformers, gigantic insulators, receiving towers, unrecognizable mazes of wires, and the half-dozen signs that screamed DANGER—HIGH VOLTAGE. "Remember, if we get caught, the secretary will disavow any knowledge of our actions."

"Huh?"

Rhino sighed. "A joke, asshole. Didn't you ever watch *Mission Impossible!"*

"Before my time. But what's with this perimeter crap? Are you ROTC or something this semester?"

“Never mind, then.” Rhino walked to the fence, handing the wire cutters to Bruno, the only one there who wasn’t griping about something. He went down on his knees without protest and began to clip the chain-link fence.

“Damn,” he muttered after a minute.

Rhino bent down, squinting at his handiwork. So far he had managed to cut one lousy link. “What’s wrong?”

“Didn’t your dad ever sharpen these things? We need bolt cutters.”

Rhino looked at his watch, pressing the light button with a finger. “Ten-fifteen, Bruno. No time to go back, and no time to waste. Keep cutting.”

Bruno went back to it, grumbling. Rain started to waft down in a fine mist that rapidly swelled to a black curtain of falling water. Everyone was soaked instantaneously. This did nothing at all for their tempers. Rhino positioned them at strategic points, then went back to watching Bruno.

It looked as if this would take a long, long time.

Chapter • Fourteen

The lake was still, the water barely ruffled by the slight breeze drifting down from the park. Shimmering mist hung in an enchanting pall over the water, dancing, swirling into odd shapes that looked like human images, then were gone, replaced by others. The water lapped at the muddy shore in small steady beats. Cattails and rushes stood silent watch.

Jonathan burst up to the surface one hundred feet from shore, breathing hard, his old diving mask tight around his eyes and nose. He jerked it away from his face and dumped a small amount of water back into the lake. He propped it on his forehead, wincing where the strap pulled at his hair, and fought to bring his breathing under control. He had been at this for fifteen minutes, growing slowly desperate. The lake was only ten or twelve feet deep but the bottom was sludge eight inches thick. The necklace could have worked its way underground by now; in the murky black Jonathan was as good as blind.

He looked at the shore, trying to remember where the road worker had thrown the pick. It was impossible to tell. Worse than that, the chain might have fallen off in flight and landed God only knew where. The television people were waiting for their big scoop; Rhino and the boys were following orders at the power station. It looked as if the only one not following the plan was Jonathan.

He pulled his mask back into place, took a breath, and vanished underwater. The surface became immediately still. He stayed down for more than a minute; when he broke through again he was gasping and spluttering.

No luck. He cursed. It was blacker than the dark side of the moon down there, the water was a bit too cool to be comfortable, and the frigging ancient mask had sprung several unfortunate leaks. He pulled it off his head and wiped his eyes, managing to drop the mask. He reached for it, a small winking light under the cold rind of moon shining so blearily between the breaks in the clouds, and succeeded in washing it farther away. He started for it as it began to sink from sight. Top-of-the-line Undersea Sports or not, it had the floatation powers of your average rock. Jonathan watched helplessly as it slipped out of sight.

He howled curses at the lake and the grass and the trees. Angry, he

took a huge breath and dived again, determined not to come up until he had found the chain, or even the pick, anything to let him know this plan wasn't totally botched.

He was down a minute-fifteen. When he burst up he sounded like a man on the brink of drowning, but he had no chain and he had no pick. All he had was bad luck. He looked up to the moon sliding between the clouds, then closed his eyes in supplication. "Ah, Jesus," he moaned. "I can't do this anymore."

Something moved in the water behind him, some large thing that could not be a fish, frog, even a turtle. It was big and it was coming. Jonathan broke out in gooseflesh, thinking vaguely of the Loch Ness Monster and how awful it would be to discover the Maryville Monster here, alone, out of breath, and about to drown.

He turned around. The bones of his neck creaked like old hinges.

Alison was swimming toward him. That was bad. Jonathan had no desire to see the bloated remains of her or anyone else. Further, she wasn't exactly swimming, just sort of … coming. This was no shimmering image; it was Alison in the flesh. A broad V of surf went before her as she was propelled toward Jonathan without moving. He turned and began to swim madly for the shore, inexplicable fright surging through his veins like cold lake water.

"Jonathan," she called out. *"Don't be afraid!"*

He was afraid anyway. Everything seemed dim and unreal now. Alison appeared only when danger was close. Jonathan did not want to face danger right now, perhaps never again. His feet struck mud and he waded out of the water, his wet clothes trying to drag him back. He chanced a look over his shoulder.

She was gone.

He turned fully and looked hard at the water. Under a streak of moonlight it was a misty mirror of the sky, scudding clouds chasing across its surface, no ripples or evidence that she had been there.

No ripples or evidence that *he* had, either.

He began to shiver, confused now, as if this were a dream where impossible things happened that seemed plausible, even commonplace. Was he awake? It was getting hard to remember.

Warm arms snaked around his waist from behind. He gasped, turning with a jerk.

Alison. No ghost drenched in pure light. Just Alison.

"Jonathan, don't be afraid," she whispered.

But he was afraid. She was alive and real, not a ghost anymore. He had almost gotten used to *that.* "You're not alive," he said, trying to disengage himself from those warm and solid arms.

"So?" she said. "I'm here anyway."

She went on tiptoe and kissed him. He kissed her back, hesitant at first, then pressing his lips hard against hers. She was real and touchable and alive. It had to be a dream.

They sank to the grass together, locked in an embrace Jonathan had longed for for so many months, and was getting at last.

Forty minutes later Bruno and Rhino, taking turns with the dull wire cutters, had made a hole large enough for a man to fit through. Bruno straightened, examining one hand and whining about blisters the size of California. Rhino had several too, but wasn't about to admit it. He picked up the heavy rubber gloves and the crowbar, grunting when a crick lodged itself in his back. God, the perils of turning twenty-one and being old.

He and Bruno stared at each other. Rain still fell in an eternal downpour. The reluctant sentries stood at their posts feeling miserable and stupid, but they weren't giving up yet. That, at least, was good news.

Rhino stuck the wire cutters in a back pocket of his Levi's, hoping he would never have to use them again on this dreadful night. He vowed that his dad would receive a brand-new pair come Christmas.

Bruno went down with a grunt and wormed himself through the hole. They had trampled the sparse grass at the base of the hole into muck, and it was through this that he slid, grumbling, whispering inventive curses. Rhino followed, getting a load of cold mud down the front of his pants as he wriggled through. He stood up and looked around.

"Well," Bruno said after a moment. "Where to, Bwana?"

Rhino shrugged. "We've got to find the central switching unit. Remember the big blackout New York had when we were kids? Some idiot had flipped the wrong switch in the central unit, so that's what we have to find."

"Why the gloves, then? What the hell's the crowbar for?"

"You think I'm going to touch a billion volts with my bare hands? Why not stand in a bucket of water while I'm at it? Don't be an idiot."

Bruno eyed him, then swept an arm to indicate Rhino should proceed. Rhino did, thinking that any fool who would fool around at a switching station without a flashlight was a fool indeed. He saw a tall metal shed, roughly the size of an outhouse. Red and white signs, gray in this dark, warned everybody to stay away, Authorized Personnel Only. Rhino guessed this was the place. All the other structures here were either doorless or not locked.

They went to it. A fat steel bar ran the width of the door, secured on one end with a huge padlock. Bruno lifted it in his hand, making the hasp rattle. “What about this, O Great White Electrician? The world’s biggest padlock.”

Rhino thought about it. The wire cutters wouldn’t tickle that beast. The crowbar would flee in terror. Only one thing to do, then.

“Pick it,” he said. Lightning ripped across the sky, booming in the west. In the flash Rhino could see the padlock clearly. His heart performed a quick nosedive. It was one of those eighty-dollar Master Lock jobs, the ones that could withstand a bullet. What the hell were they supposed to pick it with?

Bruno voiced the same question.

Rhino deliberated. What else to do? It was here that they needed to be. Horsing around with the other, more unknown stuff might result in electrocution and a deep-fried defensive lineman.

Rhino dug in his pocket. He came out with a small penknife. He handed it to Bruno, who stared at it incredulously.

“With *that* little Boy Scout knife?”

“Precisely.”

“It’s frigging impossible!”

“Pick it.”

“It’s a felony!”

“No, it’s a lock. Pick it.”

“Why me?”

“’Cause I don’t feel like going to jail.”

“Funny man,” Bruno grunted, took the knife, and went to it.

It was eleven-fifteen, and still raining buckets.

At the park there was no rain at all. Jonathan had fallen asleep in Alison’s arms, lulled there by her warmth and his own weariness. She was caressing his face with gentle fingers, watching him sleep. Suddenly she snapped up to a sitting position. Her eyebrows drew together.

She started shaking Jonathan. “Wake up,” she hissed. “Jonathan, *wake up!”*

He pulled away, nestling himself deeper into the blankets, not wanting to leave her. The thought of waking up drove a sharp wedge of anxiety into his guts, making sleep even harder to maintain. Rain was beating on the windows of his apartment, the bedroom flashing a harsh and brilliant white whenever lightning cut the sky. He drove his

head deeper into his pillow, and slept on.

His television came alive by itself, filling the room with ghostly blue light and the faint hum of electricity. The screen showed a bird in a tree. The branches nodded up and down in a gentle breeze. A rather prissy-sounding man was saying …

"… The red-crested nuthatch is one of nature's most elusive arboreals, with a light, lilting song and …"

Something squawked. The man began to gurgle. There was a loud thump, and he was quiet.

The tree rustled, and the bird flew away.

Horace Pinker crawled up the tree into camera range, scattering small branches and leaves, grinning insanely as always, his orange overalls with their checkered stripe seeming to glow with electric intent. He cupped his hands around his eyes and leaned forward until his face and hands were pressed to the glass face of the TV, like a burglar looking into a window.

And he began to to push himself through it, squeezing out, his head through now, his hands on the carpeted floor now, pulling himself out of the television by digging his fingernails into the nubbles in the carpet, straining, grunting, grinning.

His knees thumped on the floor. He jerked his feet out.

He howled with laughter …

… but Alison was shaking Jonathan in his dream, rattling him around like a corpse, gently slapping his face. His eyes pulled open and he stared at her, confused.

"Huh?"

"Jonathan," she hissed, "it's Pinker!"

Jonathan sat up, looking around dizzily. In the mist over the lake he could see those human shapes, changing, shifting. Diane was out there, his foster mother Diane who had died last year, and there was Cooper, and Pac-Man, even the pale ghost of Sally, the little girl Jonathan never had a chance to know.

Diane stretched her hands to him. "Jonathan! Stop sleeping, please!"

"Yeah, man, wake up," Pac-Man shouted.

Copper loomed up, smiling. "Watch your ass, boy! Don't get caught napping!"

Jonathan turned to Alison. "I don't want to go through with this. Why should I go back? Why be away from you and in the madness waiting on the other side?"

Alison ran a hand over his face, still wet from swimming. “You’ve *got* to, Jonathan, or you’ll die.”

“So I die—who cares? I don’t want to be away from you again.”

She kissed him, and whispered this into his ear: “You’ll never be apart from me again. Never.”

He blinked, confused. Alison turned in an instant into the sparkling white ghost he had seen before, and then she flung herself against him without sound, melting into him with a warm and pleasant sensation. He looked out to the lake and its shifting ghosts, but the ghosts were gone and the mists were gone and the lake was gone …

… and he woke up, jerking bolt upright, the blankets twisted around his legs as if he had struggled in his sleep. He wiped his eyes with the heels of his hands as lightning flashed outside. Rain came down in relentless streams, spatting against the windows. He noticed that the television was on, a late-night evangelist spouting warnings to the errant listeners that they’d better send cash or fry for eternity.

“And the Beast shall rise out of the pit and walk among the world, and great shall be the devastation. Woe to the man who is without God, and woe even more to the man or woman who has not contributed to this ministry—who has not dug deep to send cash or check to this anti-Beast brigade of True Believers girding for battle. Send your dollars for Jesus now!”

He put his feet on the floor, disgusted, and padded to the bathroom, where no blood dripped and no talking corpses rose from the bathtub, and got himself a drink of water. He went back and wearily plopped himself down in his relaxation chair. He put his shoes back on and stared blearily at the face of the TV huckster. He was wearing a suit that probably had cost as much as this Barcalounger. His hair was cemented in place with hairspray. His watchband was studded with diamonds. He was raging on about something, but suddenly it didn’t sound quite right.

“Beware the Beast! He is among you—check your perimeter—check your perimeter—check your perimeter—check your perimeter …”

Jonathan gaped at the television as the strange minister’s face grew closer and closer until only his mouth filled the screen. Jonathan felt confused, a twinge of fear plucking at his mind. Check your perimeter? What in the hell—?

His fingers went up to his throat. Something was vibrating there, feeling almost hot. He found a chain and pulled it forward for a better look.

Alison’s golden heart. What in the hell—?

His chair gave a lurch. He looked down while the minister's chant went on without end.

The chair was sprouting arms. Not chair arms, but thick, sweating arms covered with an obscenity of tattoos, Gothic mumbo jumbo, occult signs, swastikas, and hideous faces. Jonathan leapt upright, an involuntary squawk bursting out of his mouth, the chair still holding on to him with its unbelievable arms that were so much like Pinker's. He staggered around in a small circle while his chest was being slowly crushed. He turned his head to see what monstrosity was behind the chair, knowing it was Pinker but not quite ready to fight that battle now.

The uppermost upholstery buttons flapped open to reveal slitted, evil eyes. They blinked at him with mindless ferocity. Jonathan screamed and waltzed around while his chair clung to him as if glued. The chair jostled once more, and Jonathan looked back, ready to expect anything but what he saw.

The chair's back was bulging outward, the form of a skull mashing itself through the vinyl. It became round, padded with flesh, and the face of Horace Pinker peeled out from it, leering at Jonathan, hissing in his ear, laughing.

"This Barcalounger is gonna kick your ass," he crowed.

Legs clad in Day-Glo orange burst out of the bottom of the chair. Jonathan was thrown through the room and crashed against a wall. He saw stars, but through them he could see the chair stretching and pulling, the fabric groaning, and then it was Pinker, bald head flecked with burns and scabs, upholstery-button eyes gleaming. The power cord to the chair was attached to his side. He seemed to be swelling, puffing up, growing larger as electricity was pumped into him from the wall socket.

His eyes slid shut in ecstasy. Jonathan's experiences with Pinker had taught him never to hesitate, never to have mercy. He scrambled to his feet and ran at him, hoping at least to bowl him over and pull the plug on his power source.

He slammed into Pinker. A gigantic blast of electricity hurled him back as neatly as if he had jumped from a skyscraper and landed on a trampoline. Blue fire made a tracework around his fingers and hands, burning, sending smoke wafting upward. He screamed again. Pinker was still plugged in, still gaining power. Jonathan charged him once more, swerving at the last moment to veer into the hallway, the stench of his own burning flesh stinging his nostrils. Pinker tore the cord from his body, glowing with power.

Jonathan took two steps toward the front door, which the landlord had replaced at Jonathan's expense, when Pinker sizzled into

existence from the overhead light fixture, which the landlord had not replaced. He dropped to the floor, his eyes full of glee.

"It's hard to outrun Reddy Kilowatt, asshole!"

He was right. Jonathan ran into the living room, mad panic threatening to reduce him, crush him, overtake his brain. Pinker snapped out of the overhead light fixture in a burst of orange sparks, laughing and prancing. Jonathan tried to swerve, but Pinker was gone and he stumbled over the couch, landing hard on the floor. His teeth clicked and he could taste salty blood on his tongue. He got up, dazed by the noise and the fireworks. Pinker's laughter seemed to spring from the walls. He popped out of a lamp, exploding the shade, screeching with joy. Jonathan staggered back as he vanished in a cascade of brief electrical fire. Then Pinker flashed alive beside him, one arm still moored to the wall switch by the door. The air in the room grew heavy with acrid smoke. Coughing, Jonathan stumbled out and went for the bedroom.

Pinker was already there, his body crackling and buzzing while sparklets of brilliant orange orbited around him too fast to follow. Jonathan put on the brakes, but too late; he fell into Pinker's open arms. Pinker crunched him in a huge bear hug, howling in his ear.

Jonathan screamed. His body jerked and spasmed out of control as unbearably high voltage surged through him, seeming to blow the top of his head off. He smelled fresh smoke, and knew it was coming from him, wisps of hot smoke roiling out of his nose and mouth. He twisted uselessly back and forth while being baked alive.

He managed to pull an arm free. It twisted and flapped with a life of its own. With effort he was able to grab the heart hanging at his neck. He shoved it in Pinker's face.

Pinker reeled back with a shout of raw pain. He scrubbed at his face like a chipmunk. Jonathan advanced on him, grinning a bit himself. For the first time good old Horace P. was on the run instead of Jonathan. He backed away, shielding his eyes, his face drawn down into a baby's sniveling pout.

"Life's a bitch sometimes," Jonathan growled, pressing forward.

Pinker looked around, his eyes revealing desperation and … fear. The big bad boogeyman was terrified. Jonathan laughed in his face.

Pinker spun around with a frightened squeal. He dived headfirst into the face of the television, where some old black-and-white cowboy show was airing. The television jittered during his passage, threatening to fall backward. Jonathan watched this with growing understanding. There was, of course, no copycat killer at all. He had known that. Now it was clear that Pinker was loose in the airwaves, able to pop around as he pleased, to butcher as he pleased.

Jonathan wrapped both hands around the tiny golden heart, full of a desperate desire that these atrocities never happen again, even if he had to die to stop them.

“Alison,” he whispered fervently, “if you’re really in me, *give me the power to do this!”*

He launched himself headfirst at the television, expecting a burst of broken glass and a bleeding head stuck full of shards, an explosion of the mysterious inner workings, possibly a fire.

None of these things happened. The TV jostled a little, and then was still.

Jonathan fell headlong into a black and airless hole in reality.

Chapter • Fifteen

The hole bottomed out abruptly, dumping Jonathan on a sandy desert floor with a soft but distinct *thump!* He sat up, scrubbing sand out of his hair, looking around in bewilderment. He had gotten sand in his mouth as well, and leaned forward to spit the grit out before it made him sick to his stomach. He got to his feet, wobbling a bit, spluttering a lot. A merciless afternoon sun blazed down on his head from a flawless blue sky; not far to his left was the bleached skull of a cow, nested in sagebrush. Mountains ranged up to his right, looking shimmery and purple in the distance. The whole backdrop was dotted with thirsty-looking cactus that marched away to the horizon. The scenery seemed oddly familiar, though Jonathan had never been farther west than St. Louis.

He started walking, too stunned to think right. Sweat sprang up on his forehead and stayed there. His Reeboks picked up a load of sand with every step, but he went on, unable to figure out why he had landed here, or if he had knocked himself out on the television screen and was snoozing peacefully in his bedroom on the floor. And, by the way, where was Pinker?

A sudden screech made him turn around.

An Indian in warpaint and feathers was sprinting toward him, barely ten yards away. In his upraised fist he held a long steel knife.

Hmm, Jonathan thought. What do you think of *that?*

The Indian lunged with a shriek of rage. Jonathan cowered back, not believing much of this, but not quite ready to disbelieve it entirely. A movement to the left caught his eye, an orange streak of something quite familiar. Pinker charged at the Indian, wrestled him to the ground at Jonathan's feet, and cut his throat with his own knife. Blood washed across the sand, sparkling red. The Indian made slobbery noises as he tried in vain to breathe. Pinker straightened, sneering down at the warrior.

"No one gets to do it but me, fool." He looked over to Jonathan, then turned the blade so that it caught the sunlight, making it wink cruelly through its dripping coat of blood.

He charged at Jonathan. The knife swooped horizontally, intending to slash his stomach open. Jonathan jerked back, sucking his stomach in. The blade whispered across his tee shirt, flew from Pinker's grip, and then Jonathan was falling again, a victim of the hole, tumbling

from black to black with a silent scream bursting out of his mouth.

Pinker fell, too.

Jonathan landed face-first in snow. He raised himself, blinking, trying to see in the half-light. He stood up, and realized his feet were in six inches of icy water.

A gigantic explosion ripped the night with harsh light. Jonathan ducked instinctively, covering his head against the rain of dirt clods. Shrapnel whistled overhead.

More explosions, a barrage of them. Jonathan realized he was in a trench. There were other men here, wearing dark uniforms and old-fashioned coal-scuttle helmets. German helmets.

He had fallen into World War One in the middle of winter, wearing only his Reeboks and his Levi's and his black tee shirt. His teeth began to chatter.

Someone shouted something. Jonathan turned to look. The rows of exhausted-looking men on either side of the trench were attaching long bayonets to their old-fashioned wooden rifles. The smell of used gunpowder drifted over, burning his throat.

Another shout. Men clawed their way out of the trench. A distant machine gun began to chatter. Some men fell; some didn't. Still they charged, jumping low barriers of barbed wire, at times flinging themselves into bomb craters when the bullets came too close.

Jonathan watched in dread. The attack was faltering. Men were raked down like dominoes. The screams of the wounded and dying filled the air. And then the other side was charging, men wearing heavy coats and helmets, clambering out of their own trench not forty yards away. As they ran they stabbed the wounded on the ground with their own long bayonets, then ran forward again. Jonathan saw that their helmets had a curious ridge on top. He vaguely recalled having seen such things in a book. These men were French, the romantic French, but French or not, they didn't seem to be romantically inclined right now. One soldier—just a boy, Jonathan saw as the soldier jumped into the trench—swung his rifle around and prepared to stab Jonathan. Once again Jonathan cringed back, and there was Pinker, all orange and checkerboard squares, popping out of nowhere. Someplace along the line he had picked up a rifle. He stabbed the French boy in the back of the neck. The bayonet punched through with a wet popping noise. The boy fell forward and hit the muddy water with a splat.

Pinker chuckled.

A voice blared suddenly, seeming to come down from the sky:

"In the last eighty years alone, over one hundred twenty million people

have been killed outright in warfare between civilized nations. This is the equivalent of the combined populations of England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and East Germany—or the entire population of the United States in the 1930s."

Good grief, Jonathan thought as Pinker swung out with the rifle butt. This is a PBS documentary!

He dodged the rifle and crawled out of the muddy trench. Another barrage of artillery was raining down on the dead and the dying, blowing bodies into mushy pieces. Jonathan ran from Pinker, dodging explosions as best he could, as terrified of this battlefield as he was of Pinker. He tripped and fell into a crater, breaking through a thin layer of ice, his face splashing into the muck. He pushed himself up on his arms and found that he was staring at the shattered face of a skull.

He dived out, horror and revulsion crawling up his throat like cold slime. Parker lashed out and cracked the rifle butt across his head above the right ear.

The PBS narrator started to chatter about the senselessness of war, the voice of God from heaven. Jonathan couldn't agree more: War is hell. But so was Pinker, and his rifle-butt trick had sent Jonathan reeling. He stumbled backward toward another crater in the black earth and fell in with a scream, expecting more ice and muck and corpses.

Instead he was falling, falling. The hole had struck again. This time it dumped him on another barren chunk of desert, one that stretched to the horizon in all directions, no more mountains, no more Indians, just sand. Dusk was approaching, the last light tingeing the clouds orange. Distantly Jonathan thought he could see a tower of some sort with a red light flashing on top. The TV tower in Maryville? He thought not. Maryville was not famed for its deserts.

Pinker materialized out of the same nowhere Jonathan had come from, thumping down onto the sand, landing on his feet and ready to lunge in an instant. He snapped the bayonet free from the rifle and tossed the rifle away, more content with his usual weapon.

"I don't know about you," he said, "but I'm having a blast!"

Unbearable white light flashed, the world's biggest flashbulb, making Jonathan close his eyes. Four seconds later the blast came, and Jonathan knew: some old footage of a 1950s atomic bomb test. Life in TeeVee Land was turning out to be rather morbid. The shock wave crashed into him and Pinker in a wash of superheated air and blown sand, bowling them head over heels, flinging them to a new scene in this celluloid nightmare. Jonathan pinwheeled through the darkness of the hole, able this time to see a tiny square dot below,

aglow with shifting colors. He fell toward it, wondering dimly what strange new nightmare lay ahead.

The Herb Jackson family had no idea what strange things lay ahead for them, either. Herb was an assistant manager of the Maryville Plumbing Supply Company, a job that paid him just enough to live and eat and support his wife, Margaret, and their two kids, Betty and Chuck. Occasionally there were a few hundred bucks extra in the bank, and when that lucky event came to pass they would go shopping and buy themselves some little trinket or doodad that they normally wouldn't buy. The last time this happened, they had two hundred dollars, and went out to see what kind of gizmo they could rustle up. After pounding the pavement all day (with Betty and Chuck whining and fighting) they decided to take a breather in the Maryville Towne Center Square, a large shopping mall on the southern side of town. While in there, they stopped at Jimmy's Television Sales to admire one of the new giant-screen sets, in particular an RCA with a picture tube roughly four feet square and a built-in VCR.

They admired its appearance. They marveled at its superb giant picture. They delighted in the fake wood casing, which just happened to match the paneling in their living room perfectly. Their current TV was no slouch, a twenty-five-inch Japanese affair with remote control, but in a burst of mad splurging they decided to ask how much this giant screen cost. If it was more than two hundred bucks, well, the shop could just shove its TV someplace else.

Herb, feeling decidedly giddy, drunk on wealth, confronted the nearest man with a nametag clipped to his suitcoat lapel, and inquired as to the cost of the beast. The salesperson first gave him a brief introductory lesson in how to operate this new monster TV, showing Herb the fabulous remote control, which had more buttons than a shirt factory, and the features available on no other TV yet made. Herb was able to grasp the concept immediately. The salesman whipped out a brochure that described in agonizing detail every feature of that massive behemoth. Well, Herb said at long last, how much?

Two thousand, the man said. Only two thousand clams.

Two grand? Christ in heaven, it would take him fifty years to pay for it.

Not at all, he was told. How much you got on you?

Just two hunnert, Herb said, feeling absolutely dismal.

Two hundred down, the fellow said, and fifty bucks a month for thirty-six months.

Herb thought. He sweated. He paced around while Betty and Chuck

howled for pennies to dump in the gumball machine, which would aid the Shriners in their battle against childhood diseases. Herb paced and fought mental duels with his budget. His brain's energy pile was nearing critical mass when he decided to say screw it, and handed over all his money.

The television was delivered the next day. This day, to be exact.

Thus it was that even though it was close to midnight, the kids, Betty and Chuck, were still up, as were Herb and Margaret, and they were watching every show they could get their eyes on while Herb fiddled endlessly with the remote control. The old TV, incidentally, had gone into Betty's room, under the stipulation that she use it for one week, and Chuck the next. This way the old dinosaur could serve both masters until it fizzled out and died.

It was commercial time, and Herb was flipping through all 130 channels, seeing how far his reception would go. He nearly went spastic when the new TV produced a snowy, hazy version of Channel 64, Channel 64 in *Cleveland,* if you can believe it. Boy was Herb happy. Then everybody barked at him to go back to the original show, which was some kind of call-in thing discussing the rise of neo-Nazism in northern Idaho.

He flipped back to the right station just as Jonathan Parker thrust out of the giant picture screen, a man covered with mud and dreck, cut off at the waist. This strange apparition propped its hands on the floor and looked around.

Margaret screamed and jumped behind the couch. Herb squawked like a chicken and dropped the remote. Betty flew into her bedroom with a shriek. Chuck's little eyes bulged. Man, but was this a *television!*

Jonathan crawled out, looking strangely translucent, a multicolored ghost crawling out of the mammoth picture tube. Horace Pinker burst out behind him, slashing the air with the bayonet. Jonathan sprinted away, knocking over furniture. They locked arms and wrestled, smashing noisily into an end table, crushing it to sticks and demolishing the expensive vase that was on it. As they slammed each other, all the framed pictures on the wall popped off and slid to the floor in multiple crashes. The large potted palm in the corner went next, crushed to shards under the writhing steamroller that was Jonathan and Pinker.

Herb swore off spending splurges forever while these two ghostly enemies demolished his living room. He lifted his feet when they rolled against the couch; he made a noise of protest that came out in a mousy squeak when the orange ghost sliced the carpet to rags in a futile attempt to stab the muddy guy in the face.

He saw the muddy one look at his ghost watch. This mud-creature

looked at the remote control, lying where it had been kicked in the melee, and rushed over to pick it up. Then he dived back into the TV. The orange ghost followed with a howl.

Margaret poked her head up from behind the couch. She surveyed the destruction. "Gosh," she breathed, agape at the carnage. "Talk about audience-participation shows!"

Herb went over and unplugged the set. "Piece of shit," he grumbled, and aimed an angry, shaking finger at the dead TV. "Tomorrow your ass goes back to the store!"

Jonathan let the hole in reality take him wherever it wanted, no longer frightened of it, knowing now that he could no more control his next destination than he could control the orange monstrosity flailing in the emptiness behind him, some ten yards back.

There was no square of light this time, nothing to see at all except Pinker, squirming just as helplessly as he was. Jonathan closed his eyes, trying to count off the seconds, wondering how long this free-fall could go on.

It ended before he got to three. He fell with a fleshy thud on top of the television evangelist, sending him skidding on his ass across the tiny stage. His Holiness recovered and stared in amazement as Pinker dropped out of nowhere, this time falling to his knees with a grimace of pain. Jonathan scuttered around to face him, not feeling the slightest pity that poor Pinker had hurt his bad knee. If it was so awful, why hadn't he dropped the knife?

"Sweet *Je*—sus," the fraud minister blurted. The choir off to the left gave a community gasp. For the camera they were arranged in a bowling-pin formation.

Pinker grinned at the man. "Not quite Jesus yet, asshole. Close, but not quite." He stalked over to the man and waved a hand. A zigzag of blue electricity arced between them, and the evangelist flew backward into the choir at the edge of the stage. Bodies and long robes scattered, leaving only a seven-ten split. Pinker snarled his disappointment, then wheeled around to face Jonathan, who was watching the time while sweat poured down his face, erasing the mud in lines. It was nearing midnight.

"What are you looking at your watch for, pencil-neck? You're not going to give me the slip again, and I've got all the time in the world."

Jonathan looked at him, gasping for breath. "I'm not going anywhere, Pinker. *We* are!"

He jammed a finger on the remote control's CHANNEL button and held it there. Suddenly they were flipping from one new scene to the next,

too fast to follow. Pinker let out a yelp and dived for Jonathan and the remote control, but Jonathan spun around and kept it out of reach. Bizarre scenery flashed around them, a forest, a Tom and Jerry cartoon, a prairie with a little house, a cat food commercial. On the exotic TV beeper Jonathan saw that he was approaching Channel 8. One more press of the button and they were at the Parker House, in Sally's bedroom where the nightmare had started. It was seven minutes to midnight.

Walker Stevens was lounging around feeling grumpy while his cameraman and sound man played two-handed whist on the floor with a tired old deck of Bicycles one of them had brought along. Walker was about ready to call it quits and storm out of the room and the house. Five till midnight indeed. The copycat killer in custody. Bah. The Parker kid was playing a practical joke as revenge for Channel 8's extensive coverage of his arrest.

"Two more minutes," he muttered. "This had better be good."

At that moment Jonathan and Pinker burst into glowing, half-visible life in the far corner of the bedroom, two translucent specters pounding the crap out of each other. Walker fell back, too amazed to speak. Dave the cameraman jumped up and shouldered his camera, ignoring the tripod. The camera, feeding into the truck and beaming live signals to the station without so much as We Interrupt This Program For A Special News Bulletin, rolled while the sound man hopped to his feet and began fiddling with his equipment. Jonathan and Pinker were busy trashing each other and the room.

"Rolling," Dave shouted.

"You've got sound," the other barked.

"Holy shit," Walker screamed. "It's him! Horace Pinker!"

Pinker turned long enough to smile into the camera. "Special bulletin, huh? I'll give you a show you won't forget."

He threw Jonathan on the bed. "Boy, I killed your phony momma and your little sister here. I'll do you here too!"

As Jonathan struggled up, Pinker ran a thumb along his knife, drawing a small trace of blood. He licked it clean, beaming idiotically. "At last," he said, and lunged. Jonathan sidestepped the knife and smacked Pinker on the face. He roared and hit back, knocking Jonathan into a wall. The necklace's clasp opened and the heart pinged to the floor. Pinker kicked it away and raised the bayonet, ready for the final strike.

"Say your prayers, sucker," he said. "I'm gonna do this real slow."

Jonathan swung the borrowed TV beeper up and pointed it at Pinker's face, knowing that if this didn't work, nothing would.

He pressed the FREEZE FRAME button even as he cringed backward, awaiting the knife.

Pinker froze with his arm still raised, the knife gleaming. He swiveled his eyes around, looking stunned. “Hey!” he shouted, struggling to move. “What the hell—”

It was Jonathan’s turn to grin at last. “You’re what’s wrong with TV today, Pinker.”

He fingered the FAST REWIND button.

Pinker flew backward, arms flailing, legs uselessly pedaling. He looked like a man suspended by wires, a puppet driven by an insane puppeteer. He snarled and bellowed as he circled the room. The news people ducked, but caught it all on camera.

“You bought into TV, Pinker, and you’re bound by its rules,” Jonathan said, and began punching buttons on the remote control in a frenzy, nearly laughing at Pinker’s crazy reactions, FAST FORWARD was nifty, but SLO-MO was hilarious. The big bad man was utterly helpless at last.

Jonathan froze him in place. Pinker howled and cursed. *“What is going on!”*

Jonathan looked at his watch. It was five minutes before midnight. “Do it, Rhino,” he said, and threw Pinker around some more, waiting for the finale.

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“Got it,” Bruno said. “Here’s your piece-of-shit knife back.”

Rhino pocketed it while Bruno worked the padlock out of its hasp. The steel bar dropped to the ground with a clang, and the door drifted open. Rhino looked at his watch. Five till twelve. Not bad for a gang of amateurs.

“What now?” Bruno asked, peeking inside. “I can’t see shit.”

Rhino pulled the heavy rubber gloves onto his hands, then picked up the crowbar. “Stand back,” he said. “I’m going to make a mess.”

He disappeared inside. Things clunked. Megavolts surged with a high buzzing sound. Rhino started beating something with the crowbar. Bruno frowned. Did Rhino have the vaguest idea what he was doing?

Apparently so. A huge shower of white-hot sparks belched out of something, stinging Bruno’s face and arms. He pulled back while Rhino roared a victory shout inside the building. He came out with smoke drifting out of his hair, but he was grinning.

“Found it and short-circuited it. The crowbar’s shot, but just watch

what happens."

They looked down to the city, where lights sparkled like diamonds. Square by square, they began winking out. In seconds the entire city was black.

"Bingo," Rhino said, wiping the rain from his eyes. "I hope Jonathan gets a kick out of this."

He did. As the lights dimmed and went out, he strode to where the necklace lay and picked it up. He fastened it around Pinker's neck. Pinker screeched and howled. "Get that thing off me!" he shouted.

Jonathan smiled. "A gift from me and Alison, Pinker. We give it to you."

Pinker raged helplessly. Smoke sizzled from his neck as the necklace melted his flesh, burning its way to the bone. He began to glow an unholy red. "You want to know your real roots, Jonathan?" he gurgled. "Huh? I'll tell you. I beat you then and I can beat you now."

He stopped, grimacing in agony. Jonathan stepped back, not knowing what to expect. Lightning lit the sky outside, and Jonathan saw in that brief flash that Pinker was decaying, losing himself, winking out. There was a loud explosion of orange sparks. Pinker let out a huge scream of pain and rage as another explosion tore a chunk of him away. When he had almost disappeared there was one final burst of light and sparks, and then he was gone.

Gone.

Jonathan slumped onto the bed, exhausted. The room began to sparkle, glowing white. Everything was decaying, as Pinker had decayed. Jonathan held his hand to his face and discovered that it was crawling with dying lines of blue electricity. He could feel himself fading. He lurched to his feet, looking around in desperation.

The cameraman was standing with his mouth hanging open. The dead camera was still on his shoulder. Jonathan ran for it, then jumped at its lens, knowing it was preposterous, but that it was the only way to stay alive.

The camera sucked him in, and he was falling once more, spinning through nothingness even as he began winking out.

Chapter • Sixteen

He crashed out of a television set, shattering the picture tube. Shards of glass belched across the room with a jangling crash. He crawled fully out of the set, cutting his shirt and the cuffs of his jeans. The television exploded, hurling jagged shrapnel. He ducked. When the noise was over the television was a gutted husk, burning wearily. In the wickering light he recognized this as his bedroom.

He was home. No longer winking out, no longer decaying. He was tired and sore, but he was real again. Some misty future day he might look back on this and judge it impossible, but for now he was content just to know he had survived and Pinker had not.

He smothered the flames with a blanket, then dumped a glass of water on the remains just to be sure. That done, he went outside. His neighbors were coming out too, looking around under the light of the moon at the strange sight of a city without lights. They laughed and giggled nervously. A man approached Jonathan, staring at him with eyes full of wonder. “Hey, kid! I just saw you on the tube. Was that real?”

Jonathan nodded slightly. “Real enough.”

A woman hurried over. “Wow, what a storm that was,” she said breathlessly. “But look up at the sky now!”

Jonathan looked. The clouds were gone, taking the rain with them. The sky was dense with stars. He walked over to the water-slicked street, able to see a hint of the moon and stars reflected there. The air was damp and cool, smelling clean and fresh, as it always did after a good downpour. As he walked he talked to himself—and Alison.

“Are you there? Do you see all those stars?”

“Absolutely beautiful,” she whispered.

Jonathan smiled. “It is.”

He stopped, frowning. Standing on one leg, he pulled a shoe off and emptied it onto the pavement. A pretty respectable pile of sand slid out. He emptied the other one, too.

He walked on with his hands shoved deep inside his pockets, a half-smile on his face.

It felt great to be alive again. Alive, and well.

But above him, perched high in the sky with a thousand other stars for company, one star seemed somehow weird to the people who

happened to look up to the right place. Instead of shimmering like a tiny chip of diamond, it simply hung there, large and obtrusive.

Very large. And also very orange.